Claire Brandon

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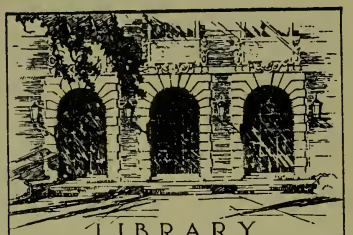

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CLAIRE BRANDON

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A NOVEL

BY

FREDERICK MARSHALL

AUTHOR OF 'FRENCH HOME-LIFE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON
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CLAIRE BRANDON.

CHAPTER XXI.

George Brandon was at Hurley. His state had grown infinitely more unbearable since the meeting at Ryde. Until he encountered Claire his remorse was an abstract sentiment; since he had seen her it had assumed a material form. The person he had wronged had not only become a reality for him, but, by a merciless malignity of fate, had aroused in him, while he was ignorant of her name, the only emotion he had experienced towards a woman. The desire to quiet his conscience was suddenly increased by the yearning to satisfy his heart. Deep sensitive feeling was superadded to repentance.

Under the influence of this combination of

emotions he had passed twelve months in exceeding pain. His self-reproach, his rage against his own offence, his glaring perception that, by his will and act, he had made himself an outcast, had all attained an unendurable development. He loathed the money which had been the price of what he now conceived to be his treason towards his brother. He hated the life he led. He hated life itself. He longed to die. But, more than all, he thirsted to repair the wrong he had done to Claire. The sight of her, the memory of her, had caused that wrong to assume, in his eyes, the dimensions of a monstrous crime. It was *that* girl he had destroyed!

All this was present to him—it was always present to him—when the post-bag brought him his sister's letter.

He had been waiting anxiously for her reply; but, when it came, he dared not open it. He took it in his hand and looked at it, with fear. It was not till a long minute had passed that he tore the envelope.

He read the contents at a glance, and then, with a start and a groan, he lifted his hand to his head and closed his eyes.

"Her life is in danger."

Those were the only words that remained in his memory.

For half an hour he sat, anchored to his chair. Then he rose and automatically went out into the garden.

There, in the sunlight, he tried to reason with himself. But reason would not come to him. No effort could bring it to his aid.

An instinct dominated him. A voice spoke within him. He heard distinctly words that seemed to issue from his heart. They said, "She must not die until she has forgiven me."

After a while another sentence formed itself in the air. He was certain it had no origin in his own will — he had no will; yet there it was, resounding to him, speaking for him: "I must go to her. I must go to her."

But these instinctive promptings, however natural they might seem to the spirit of George Brandon, were insufficient to constitute motives of action. He listened to them; he fancied even that they were justifiable; but yet he hesitated to follow them. With all his excited eagerness to entreat Claire's

pardon, he could not shut his eyes to the certainty that he would not be admitted to her bedside.

In that case it would be useless to go.

Between the aspiration to see her once more, and the conviction that, under no circumstances, would he be allowed access to her, the afternoon and evening passed away in wavering and pain.

The night brought no decision. But in the morning the power of thought came back. Its first effect was to lead George Brandon into Lorston, in order to consult Mr Cumber.

His solicitor was the only person to whom he had unfolded his mind. He had commenced his disclosures some years before by talking generally about his conscience, and by asking for advice. He had, however, obtained none, for it was altogether contrary to Mr Cumber's principles to give opinions, excepting on purely legal questions. Then he had declared, specifically and in some detail, that he deplored his conduct at the trial, and that he desired to repair it, so far as was in his power, by leaving Hurley to Claire. He made a will to that effect.

After the scene at Ryde he had added to his will a formal declaration that he believed Claire to be his brother's lawful daughter and successor.

But even this did not content him. He felt, more and more, that it would be insufficient to reinstate Claire after his death, and that, for his own satisfaction, he must do something while he was still alive. On this, however, Mr Cumber pointed out to him that, so far as the legal status of Claire was concerned, he could effect absolutely nothing. Finally, he imagined that the only practicable solution would be to offer to Claire to recognise her publicly at once, in his personal capacity, as his brother's daughter and his own niece, and to get her to come to Hurley in that character. The legal position could not, of course, be altered; but the moral aspect of the situation could, by this means, be entirely modified. The first step would be to obtain the consent of Harriet Brandon, and that was why he had written to her, leaving to Mr Cumber the task of explaining to her the plan of action if she would consent to listen to it.

The news that Claire was in danger of

death swept away this scheme, destroyed all hope, and threw George Brandon face to face again with his wearing conscience and his incurable distress.

On reaching Lorston he gave to Mr Cumber, without speaking, the letter he had received from his sister the day before.

Mr Cumber read it, but manifested no emotion. Then he looked silently at George Brandon.

After a while George Brandon was forced to say, "I am thinking of going at once to Wiesbaden. Something within me drags me there. I fear I should not be permitted to see her. But, at all events, I should have the miserable satisfaction of carrying my repentance to her at the last."

"That," said Mr Cumber, gravely, "is a question which you alone can decide."

"But—what do you think, Cumber?"

"Really, Mr Brandon, I am unable to reply. This is a matter affecting your own feelings exclusively. Feelings are so essentially personal, that they cannot be rightly measured by any one else."

"Then, as you make no objection, I shall go."

"Oh, pray do not take my silence as implying that I make no objection," urged Mr Cumber. "Really, you must not do that. I neither approve nor disapprove. It is not a point of law. In a case of this kind I can only stand entirely aside and leave you to determine your own action. I beg you not to suppose that I entertain any impression whatever on the subject."

"I repeat, Cumber, that I shall go. I came to consult you as a matter of form—because I always consult you. I am too nervous to stop here. I should get no news of her if I did. And I have a devouring need to know her exact condition. She seems to me as if she were my victim. I shudder about it. I must go. I must go. I shall start at once."

As he drove back to Hurley, the old idea of suicide—which had never entirely left him, and which frequently came back to him with a hot rush—sprang up again in vivid force. His life was not worth living as it was. And if Claire died, all idea of reparation would disappear for ever. If she died . . . well, there would be an end of everything.

And then the feeling faded again, as ab-

ruptly as it came. He dreamed, once more, of obtaining pardon, of bringing Claire, in restored health, to Hurley, and of continuing to live, himself, almost at peace with his conscience.

It was in a sudden, violent return of hope, that he told his servant to pack his clothes, and to be ready to leave with him in two hours.

. . . . . .

When Conrad Hohenwalden came back hastily to the hotel, after receiving at the Catholic church the promise that a priest should come, as soon as possible, to administer extreme unction to Claire, a telegram was handed to him.

It was from his mother's maid. It said, "The Countess has burst a vein in a fit of coughing, and is in urgent danger. Come instantly."

Conrad staggered. A low groan broke from him. A mist passed before his eyes. He gasped, "Great God! my mother too!"

After a moment he asked, half unknowingly, "When is the next train to Ems?"

It happened that a train had just started,

and that there would not be another for more than two hours.

Then he murmured convulsively, "I shall have a moment to pray here, before I go to pray there. Both at once! Awful! awful! Oh, my mother! my dear mother! shall I reach you in time?"

Heavily he dragged himself up-stairs. He sent for Harriet Brandon, and held the telegram to her.

She sank upon a chair, put one hand to her head, and with the other drew him to her, murmuring, "My friend! my friend! the hand of God is heavy on us!"

The others, hearing what had happened, came, and, in bitter distress, stood round Conrad.

Some minutes passed, almost in silence. Then a choir boy arrived from the church to announce that the priest was coming.

Conrad stood up resolutely. He and M. de Morvan went to the door of the hotel to receive the priest.

Silently they led him up.

The candles were lighted.

They all knelt down.

Behind Claire was Berthe, bowed down so low, in her simple peasant's faith, that her head almost touched the ground.

Near the bed were Madame d'Héristal and Madame de Rochedure. Spasmodic sighs broke from them. Tears trickled down their cheeks. Their fingers were clasped. Their eyes were fixed on Claire.

Her face buried in her hands, Harriet Brandon lay, almost prostrate, at Claire's feet.

At the door from the bedroom to the sitting-room, which, according to Continental usage on such occasions, had been opened wide, knelt Conrad and M. de Morvan.

The three maids and two servants of the hotel, who happened to be Catholics, were on their knees in the sitting-room. The outer door, being at the end of a passage through which no one passed, had also been left unclosed.

At the end, against the wall, was Claire.

Stifled weeping alone disturbed the intense silence.

The lamentable ceremony began.

The responses to the prayers were echoed in sobs.

As the priest was giving the last blessing, a man, a stranger, came noiselessly, softly, to the open, outer door. Straight before him, across the two rooms, above the heads of the kneeling witnesses of this mournful scene, lay Claire—in death.

The man gazed at her with a look of terror and despair.

A low strangled cry escaped him.

Moved by a force he could not resist, the man fell on his knees behind the servants, and, like the others, bowed down his head.

Then the priest had finished, and slowly turned to leave.

They all rose, the man like the others.

Harriet Brandon stood up and looked at Claire — at Claire got ready for the last voyage.

She longed to die with her, at her side.

The man, perceiving that the ceremony was ended, drew away down the passage. No one observed him. All their backs were turned to him.

The man was George Brandon. He had reached Wiesbaden an hour before ; had come to inquire about Claire ; had been

told that the priest was at that moment in the act of administering the last Sacraments to her; had asked where the room was, and had gone up, not knowing why, mechanically, scarcely consciously.

Silently, helplessly, he went down the stairs and out into the park.

He believed that all was over.

He sat upon a bench in the bewilderment of desperation.

He lost the sense of immediate realities.

He seemed elsewhere.

Suddenly, his life came surging back to him; in a few seconds it passed, complete, before his eyes; it stood out, sharply clear, but in detached episodes, like the scenes of a play.

It appeared to him once more that he heard the first story of the arrival of the child; that he determined to dispute the marriage; that he saw his sister on her knees, supplicating him; that he listened to the verdict which made him rich; that then he felt within him the successive growth of commencing doubt, of agitated conscience, of consuming remorse; that he met Claire at Ryde, and knew from

her a strange glimmer in his heart; that he passed afresh through the grinding anguish of the last twelve months; and, finally, that Claire was lying there before him, as he had just gazed at her—ashy, disfigured, dying!

And this was the outcome of his doing!

In fierce abhorrence of himself he shuddered.

He stood up, painfully. He looked before him, at the air. He muttered,—"I tore her name from her. . . . And now . . . now . . . I have killed her. A curse is on me."

. . . . . .

After the priest had gone they all remained still, for a while, in grievous sadness.

Then Conrad Hohenwalden took Harriet Brandon's hand. She could not lift her eyes to him, but she heard his broken voice: "The time has come . . . I have to say . . . my last adieu . . . to her."

Together they looked again at Claire. It seemed to them that, in a few moments, she would be no longer there.

Conrad stooped over her. He kissed her forehead. Then he knelt—his head upon her pillow.

Some minutes passed.

Slowly, he rose.

Again he kissed her—the long, last, broken-hearted farewell.

"Adieu," he gasped. "Adieu, my life, my hope. O God, have pity on me! Claire, Claire, Claire,—my Claire!"

He wrenched himself round and staggered from the room.

All was once more silence.

. . . . . .

Claire remained, throughout the afternoon, in the same condition.

Death did not come.

They all stood there. In aching care the weary hours passed.

Through three days more the fight for life continued.

Sometimes, for an instant, they despaired a little less.

On the fourth day, suddenly, the temperature of the body fell three degrees. In the evening it was noticed that, when the lips were bathed, the black crust did not form again. The swelling of the veins on the forehead and behind the ears diminished perceptibly. The night was comparatively calm.

A great burst of hope broke into them. They dared to dream that, perhaps, she was not lost.

They all prayed intensely.

Berthe declared, triumphantly, that God had come to save Claire.

The doctors were surprised — very much surprised. But they acknowledged that a real change had arisen, and said that, if it persisted, and if no complications occurred, recovery was not impossible.

The eyes seemed to be less lifeless, clearer. The lids moved a little. The breathing became more regular and quieter.

Harriet Brandon, worn with emotion, exhausted with fatigue, had been away for a while to sleep. On her return to the bedside she leaned down to Claire. Suddenly a smile appeared on her anxious face. She started up and whispered to Madame d'Héristal. "She has looked at me! She has—indeed! I am sure she knew me. Look—look—yourself!"

It was true. Light had come back into the eyes. They once more manifested thought.

Soon afterwards she spoke. Consciousness had returned.

In a few days more, convalescence had commenced.

. . . . . .

Conrad Hohenwalden reached Ems too late.

His mother was dead, suffocated by hæmorrhage from the broken vein. His distress was destroying. To travel, under such conditions, from one deathbed to another; to lose (as he thought) on the same day all he cherished, all that gave him joy; to have no longer a morrow, an object, or a hope; to be suddenly alone, unloved, — all this appeared to him, vaguely but crushingly, to be more than he could endure.

He sat down with his head in his hands and had no consciousness. The world was empty to him.

And yet he was forced to think, to decide, to act. He had to arrange the melancholy details of the journey to Austria, and to prepare for the funeral when he got there.

To close the tomb of his mother, he had to

abandon the opening grave of Claire. The constant telegrams sent by M. de Morvan told him only that she was still alive, but gave no motive for a diminution of despair. And even the miserable satisfaction of receiving frequent news ceased on the evening of the next day, when he started for Vienna. It was not until after he had arrived there that he learned suddenly there was hope. By that time he had become stupefied with anguish; he was scarcely competent to understand, scarcely able to feel relief. He had no rebound; he had lost all elasticity of spirit; he was incapable of realising that, after all, perhaps Claire might live.

. . . . . .

A week had passed.

The revulsion from despair was infinitely soothing to them. But they could not forget that, though Claire's life was spared, she only lived to suffer.

They sat round her, and looked at her with mournful smiles.

She gained strength quickly. But sadness never left her; its mark was on her as if it

could not be effaced. She rarely spoke; when she did it was but a few words, in gravity and gloom.

She did not mention Conrad.

One afternoon Harriet Brandon was called into the sitting-room, and was told that a gentleman—a Mr Gray—wished to see her.

"Mr Gray?" she said; "who is Mr Gray? But—show him in."

He entered. It was Mr Cumber's clerk.

Harriet Brandon started.

"Mr Gray!" she exclaimed. "You here? Why . . . what has brought you? Has anything happened?"

"Pray do not be alarmed," he replied. "Mr Cumber thought I had better come. . . . There was . . . something to tell you . . . something that he did not like to write . . . and it seemed to him that it was best to . . . to let you know personally."

Harriet Brandon stared at him. His unexpected visit, and, almost more, his embarrassed manner, made her uneasy; not as much or as sharply as she would have been under ordinary circumstances — the emotions she had gone through had made it difficult for her to

be anxious about anything but Claire—but still, she was distinctly nervous.

Suddenly an idea flashed across her, and shook her entire nature.

"Is it," she cried, in the intensest excitement, ". . . can it be that . . . the marriage is discovered?"

"No, I am sorry to say it is not that. It is not that at all. It is something very different. It is about your brother." And he looked strangely at Harriet Brandon.

The suspicion that the marriage had been traced had upset her abruptly. She had become in an instant violently agitated, and the disappointment that her sudden hope had not been realised, added still more to her emotion.

She went up close to Mr Gray. She felt as if she would like to shake him, so slow and reticent did he appear.

"But . . . go on, Mr Gray, I beg of you. What is it? Is my brother ill?"

"Ill . . . yes," was the reply. "At least . . . that is to say, no . . . not ill . . . but . . ."

He stopped. It was evident he was afraid

to go on. He looked timidly, hesitatingly, at Harriet Brandon.

Then she began to understand, vaguely, but yet with sufficient clearness to be impelled to ask, in a low voice, "Is George . . . is George . . . dead?"

Mr Gray fixed his eyes upon her with such evident relief, that the affirmative movement he made with his head was scarcely needed to prove to Harriet Brandon that she had guessed the truth.

"George dead! How awful!"

She clasped her hands and shuddered.

"But," she exclaimed, "how? When was it? Why do you look at me in that way? What else are you hiding from me? Why do you remain so silent? What is it, Mr Gray?"

Mr Gray twisted his hat, and seemed more and more uncomfortable. At last he said, looking at the ground, "The circumstances were painful . . . very painful . . . very distressing . . . very dreadful, indeed, I may say; and Mr Cumber thought . . ." Then he stopped once more.

Harriet Brandon stepped backwards. An expression of extreme suffering, almost of awe,

spread over her face. Solemnly she murmured—"Has he? . . . has he? . . ."

At last Mr Gray decided to speak out. "I grieve to tell you, Miss Brandon, that . . . he has shot himself."

Harriet Brandon dropped her arms. For a moment she was benumbed. Then she whispered, almost to herself, "I forgive him . . . From the bottom of my heart I forgive him. May God forgive him too."

She sat down and rested her head on her hand.

After a while she turned to Mr Gray, saying, "Now, if you please, will you give me the details?"

"Well," answered Mr Gray, who, as soon as the fact had been told, turned into a different person, and spoke with precision, as became a lawyer talking to a client. "Well, it appears that he came here . . ."

"He came *here?*" interrupted Harriet Brandon. "He came *here? Here*—to Wiesbaden? What for?"

"He came in consequence of your letter, telling him that the young lady was dangerously ill. When he received that letter he

went to Mr Cumber, and declared to him that he could not stop away. You know, Miss Brandon—at least, I believe you know—that Mr Brandon was very much changed; that he regretted bitterly his conduct about the Colonel's marriage; and that he desired, desired ardently, to undo it all. So, when he heard that the young lady was dying, he became excited, excessively excited, for he thought, naturally, that what he had done would then become irreparable; and in his disorder of mind—of course, his mind must have been disordered—he came here, because he could not remain at home. When he arrived here it was at the very moment when the last Sacraments of the Roman Church were being given to her, and it seems that when he inquired here, at the hotel, they told him so. Then, in some way, he got up-stairs and saw her through the open door; and then . . ."

"He saw her? How frightful! But how do you know all this, Mr Gray?"

"I know it from a letter he wrote to Mr Cumber before . . . before he died. I have the letter in my pocket. It tells all this. And then, as I was saying, he thought the

young lady was no more — as she has recovered, I may say so without paining you— and he went away in a broken-hearted state; in fact, from what his servant has told me, it is evident that he lost his reason. He travelled without stopping as far as Antwerp; and after staying there for a few days in a very miserable state, he wrote the letter to Mr Cumber, and . . and he put an end to his life."

"He came to that door? . . . He saw her? . . . At that awful moment?" muttered Harriet Brandon, trembling. "What an appalling punishment for him! How fearfully he must have suffered! And no one noticed him! Poor George! Poor George! And he is dead! Dead, in this way! Now, at last, I pity him. But . . . pray go on, Mr Gray; tell me all the details. I must know all."

"Well, they were at Antwerp, as I said. A report was heard in his room . . . and they had to break the door open . . . and he was found."

"Oh, George," sobbed Harriet Brandon. "Indeed I do forgive you now."

"On the table was a letter addressed to

Mr Cumber. The letter was seized by the authorities. So the servant telegraphed to Mr Cumber to come at once. But I went to Antwerp instead of him; for Mr Cumber is no longer young enough to undertake long journeys or to go through trying scenes. I obtained the letter, and I made the necessary arrangements there. Then I came on here, to tell you."

"Poor George!" murmured Harriet Brandon several times.

"Now, if you please, Miss Brandon," went on Mr Gray, as if he were in a hurry to change the subject, "I have something else to say. I have to inform you that Mr Brandon has left all his property, of every kind, to Miss Claire Brandon, on condition that she bears the name of Brandon."

Harriet Brandon heard this statement as if it scarcely interested her. At such a moment, under the conditions which had arisen, what was the use of fortune to Claire? Her life seemed destroyed; there was no place in it for money.

"And that is not all," continued Mr Gray.

"Appended to his will there is a declaration, which Mr Cumber instructed me to communicate to you as soon as possible. I have brought a copy of the will (which is deposited in Mr Cumber's hands), and if you will allow me, I will read the declaration. It is about Miss Claire Brandon's birth. It is in these words: he prepared them himself:—

"'I desire that it shall be made publicly known that I deplore, with my whole heart, the attitude I took up with reference to my brother's marriage. I have become convinced, by long thought and by careful consideration of the circumstances, that my brother was properly and legally married, and that his daughter Claire, whom I caused to be dispossessed of her rights, was his lawful daughter, born in wedlock. It is to repair, in part, the wrong I did to her, that I have bequeathed to her my entire property, and that I have made it a condition that she shall bear the name of Brandon. But that is insufficient to satisfy my conscience. I feel the need of stating, publicly, that I have lived for years, and that I shall die in the

absolute conviction that I deprived Claire Brandon of her rights, and that, so far as this present declaration can restore them, morally, I do restore them. I declare, hereby, that I retract every word I have said, every act I have performed, with reference to my brother's marriage, and that it is my earnest hope that the proofs of it will be discovered, so that the judgment which I obtained, under a totally false appreciation of the case, may be legally annulled. I ask forgiveness from my sister Harriet, and from my niece Claire. I require my executors to publish this declaration.'"

"When did he write that?" asked Harriet Brandon.

"The declaration is dated the 20th October last year. Mr Brandon had it drawn up and signed as soon as he returned from a long cruise he had made in his yacht."

Harriet Brandon sighed, then she added, "For the moment, Mr Gray, I am unable to say anything to you about all these sad things. I must try to tell my niece, if possible. I should like to have time to think. I suppose

you can remain here, without inconvenience, for a day or two?"

"Certainly, Miss Brandon. I will do whatever you may wish. I will telegraph to Mr Cumber that I have seen you, and that I am awaiting your instructions."

CHAPTER XXII.

When Mr Gray had left, Harriet Brandon reflected for a while. She was too much upset to be able to see clearly. After all that her brother had done, she did not—she could not—mourn his death, in the usual meaning of the word; but she was exceedingly shocked and moved by it, especially by the strangely tragic circumstances which had accompanied it. Instinctively she looked at the door. She went to it; she opened it; with a slight shiver, she stepped into the passage. She placed herself where her brother must have stood; and she murmured, "It was here! Poor George! May God forgive him — as I do. How unpitying is the hand of destiny!"

Then she thought again; and gradually she became conscious that all this introduced new elements into the life of Claire. She was not

in a state to measure them, or even to perceive them distinctly; but she was certain they were there, and it seemed to her that they could scarcely fail to influence Claire's future; though in what direction she could not tell.

At last she went back to Claire, and after remaining a moment at her side, asked Madame d'Héristal, who was sitting there, to come out. As soon as they were alone, she told her the whole story.

The Marquise was much astonished and impressed by it. Like Harriet Brandon, she saw in it the action of fate; but, being less personally affected, she was able to weigh its consequences with more coolness. It seemed to her, not only that it altered Claire's position altogether, but also that it might supply her with a motive for ceasing to refuse to marry Conrad.

While they were still talking, Madame de Rochedure and M. de Morvan came in from a stroll, and were informed of what had happened.

M. de Morvan said nothing. But Madame de Rochedure asserted vehemently, that George Brandon's declaration modified the whole situ-

ation so completely that Claire ought to think herself fully justified in changing her decision and in consenting to become the wife of Count Hohenwalden.

Harriet Brandon, however, was of a contrary opinion.

"My brother's declaration and his bequest to Claire of Hurley, and of the name of Brandon, have, of course, a moral value of real importance, proceeding, as they do, from the very person who denied the marriage. But, pray remember that the legal aspect of the case remains just what it was before. As Claire has never been able yet to explain her feelings to me, I do not pretend to know their precise nature; but I suspect strongly that, in refusing to marry Conrad, she has been influenced by her legal position alone; and that what is occurring now will not supply her with a reason for altering her mind. You know, all of you, that her ideas of duty are immutable, and that nothing, absolutely nothing, will induce her to do what she believes to be wrong."

"But we can argue with her," urged Madame de Rochedure. "Ideas of duty are very mag-

nificent, and it is, in part, because she applies them so superbly, that I admire Claire. But duty, after all, is not an abstract quantity; it is only relative; it varies with circumstances; it depends on events, on common-sense, on the necessities and obligations of position, far more than on sentiments and emotions. If Claire has a fault, it is precisely that she attributes too much importance to sentiments, that she puts the ideal side of life above the practical side. In this particular case she has nearly killed herself for an ideal. As soon as she is strong enough, I shall have a fight with her about it all."

"Yes, we will all fight," observed Harriet Brandon. "We will prove to Claire, convincingly, that she is totally, radically, boundlessly wrong. And when we have proved it—to our own entire satisfaction I mean—she will tell us, very gently and very sadly—unless I am much mistaken—that she will continue to travel on her own road."

"But when do you mean to tell her?" asked M. de Morvan.

"Well, about that, I suppose we must be guided by the doctor. We had better let

him know that we have an important communication to make to her, as soon as she can bear it."

"I should say, also," put in Madame d'Héristal, "that you had better consult Count Hohenwalden. He is rather interested in all this. His mother's funeral is over. I should think he could start soon now. We ought to give him an opportunity of pleading his own cause. I think the first thing to do is to telegraph him a summary of what has happened, and ask him when he can be here."

A telegram was sent to Vienna. And then there was a good deal of wondering about the strange things that had come to pass, and of uncertain talk about future plans.

"Claire always told us she longed for a home," said Madame d'Héristal, dispiritedly. "She has got one now. But will she care for it? Will it even be a home to her at all, in the conditions under which it comes to her? She wanted to live in England. But not like this."

"I am not going to allow myself to despond, as you do," exclaimed Madame de Rochedure. "I believe in common-sense and time. I have

seen them both at work already, in a small way, and I count on them to rub out obstacles. With their aid, Claire will soon be married."

And then Harriet Brandon went back to Claire, who was beginning to wonder why she was left alone so long.

In the evening an answer came from Count Hohenwalden. He said he hoped to be able to get away in forty-eight hours, and he asked, pressingly, that nothing should be told to Claire until he arrived.

"How wise of him!" remarked Madame de Rochedure. "He objects to her being allowed time to think. But she will think all the same; it is her nature. It is quite right of him, however, to try to prevent it. He, at all events, possesses common-sense. Thinking is a most dangerous process; it does a frightful quantity of harm, especially amongst the upper classes."

"It is only just," observed Madame d'Hérістal, "that each stratum of society should have its special diseases. At the bottom we beat our wives; in the middle we vote against the Government; at the top—according to Madame de Rochedure—we think. I acknow-

ledge that it is extremely subversive to think. It is thought that has destroyed simplicity."

"In exchange," remarked M. de Morvan, mildly, "it has supplied us with food and clothes; also with newspapers, the fine arts, arithmetic, and some other things."

By the time Count Conrad reached Wiesbaden once more, Claire had become relatively well. She was able to sit up every day, on a sofa, for some hours; her head was easily tired, but it was clear; the doctor thought there would be no risk in informing her of all that had occurred during her illness.

It was agreed that Conrad should tell her.

When Claire learnt, from Harriet Brandon, that Conrad asked to see her, she made a movement of the hand, as if she were going to refuse. But, after an instant, she said, "Yes, I will see him. During my illness, I have felt and thought . . . things he had better know. And besides . . . it would be very cruel not to see him."

Conrad came into the room. Their eyes met once more.

They both were changed.

Claire was very thin and worn. Her con-

valescence had brought no mark of health into her cheek. There was a dark crescent below her eyes. Her head lay backwards, weakly.

Conrad was graver than she had ever seen him, and much fagged and weary.

He took her hand. Their gaze at each other was long, and sad, and anxious.

Suddenly, Claire became aware that Conrad was dressed entirely in black.

With surprise, with some emotion even, she exclaimed, "But—Conrad—you seem to be in mourning. Has anything happened? Have you lost a relation?" His look grew graver still. Slowly, painfully, he bowed his head. "You do not answer me," she cried, nervously. "You seem ill—and . . . Tell me, I beg you. Tell me."

She bent forward to him and looked at him, ardently.

"While you were in such danger, Claire," he said, at last; "when your life was disappearing; when all hope of saving you seemed lost,—at that awful moment I received a telegram calling me to my mother."

"Your mother! your mother! She . . .

no, it cannot be. . . . But . . . why are you in black?"

"My mother," repeated Conrad, in such sorrow that Claire could not misunderstand him.

"You . . . have lost your mother . . . Conrad?" whispered Claire, almost inaudibly, in a tone of extreme distress. "My Conrad!—oh, my Conrad!"

Her eyes filled with tears. She fell back again on the sofa, drawing him to her.

After a moment, she spoke again.

"Oh, if I could comfort you, my Conrad! If only I could comfort you, and lessen this frightful trial for you!"

Conrad answered nothing. He sat down beside her and continued to hold her hands.

"How fearful!" murmured Claire. "How could it be?"

"She burst a vein in coughing," explained Conrad. "In two hours it was over. I reached her too late."

"What? Too late? Because . . . you were with me? Oh, how cruel!"

"Dear Claire," said Conrad, gently, "I was at your side—not imagining that my mother

could need me—to pray for you at that fearful moment. I left you, dying . . . I found my mother, dead."

"Cruel! cruel!" murmured Claire. "Poor Conrad!"

"Now that I am alone," he answered, "now that I come back to you in the grief of my solitude, I supplicate you to let me speak again to you of ourselves."

"No, Conrad, not of ourselves. I have consented to see you because I wanted to give you reasons for my decision, and because I thought that, after my illness, it would console you, strengthen you, to look at me once more . . . before we part. But . . . that is all. No, do not speak to me of ourselves. I can never be your wife. I am not fit. I supposed I was . . . but I was not. I have thought unceasingly, since reason has come back to me, and it seemed to me that I had a great deal to say; but now that you are here, it all fades away, and I can only repeat . . . so sadly, Conrad, but, so truly . . . I am not fit."

"But I have to tell you things you do not know; things your aunt did not know; things which change the whole position and give you

back your name and rights. I have to acquaint you with strange events that have come to pass during your illness. Listen; listen."

She turned her head towards him with some surprise, but evidently with no curiosity or keen interest. Her expression of intense sadness remained unchanged.

"My mother's death," began Conrad, fixing his eyes upon her to watch the effects of his words, "was not the only death that happened while you lay unconscious here. There was another death, Claire."

Claire stared at him, with slightly growing attention; but still with no excitement.

"Your uncle George . . ."

"My uncle George is dead?" inquired Claire, after an instant, very gently.

"Yes. I regret to add that he died by his own hand."

"May God have mercy on his soul!" murmured Claire, laying down her head and closing her eyes.

"He has left," continued Conrad, with extreme earnestness, "a solemn declaration, which is to be published by his executors, expressing the conviction that your father and mother

were duly married, and retracting every word he ever said against the marriage. He asserts that, in his heart and conscience, he believed you to be his brother's lawful daughter. And, Claire, in proof of this, he has bequeathed to you his entire property, with the special stipulation that you are to bear the name of Brandon. As I have said already, your entire situation is changed."

Claire looked at him almost calmly, without any perturbation.

"This news is strange," she said. "My uncle seems to have been desirous, from what you say, to give back to me what he took from me. But, so far as I am acquainted with the facts, it was not in his power to efface the consequences of the verdict. Of course I know very little—nothing, indeed; my aunt has told me only the bare outlines of what occurred; and I do not refuse to listen to all the details and to such arguments as you may wish to urge upon me. You cannot doubt, Conrad, that the longing of my heart is to be convinced, to feel that I can throw myself into your arms and cry to you, 'Take me, I am worthy of you.' But, thus far, alas! I can see

no change. Thus far, within the limits of my sight, the position remains exactly as it was. My uncle may have altered his personal opinion, but the verdict is still there, Conrad."

"The verdict is a mere form, Claire. The situation itself is totally modified, morally, by the will and the declaration of your uncle. As your aunt says, it is you who are now the representative of the Brandons of Hurley."

"No, Conrad, that is not so. I may be the owner of the estate—it appears, from what you tell me, that I am. But that does not touch the verdict. I cannot be your wife so long as the marriage of my parents remains unproved. I told you so in the first anguish of the revelation which has destroyed me. I tell you so again, after meditation in sickness and sorrow. It is not alone the position in itself; that position is enough; but there is more still. My own declaration to your mother has built an irremovable wall between us. When she told me I was unworthy to bear your name, I contradicted her; I affirmed to her that I *was* worthy and that I *would* bear it. I told her that my birth was honourable; but I added, Conrad, that, if it had not

been honourable, I should have refused to be your wife. Then I learnt that it was *not* honourable. That took my rights away from me. With all the immensity of my love, Conrad, I cannot take your name, after giving that voluntary assurance to your mother—to your mother who is dead, and who can never release me from it. In the situation in which I now am, I owe a duty"—and here her voice grew fervent and vibrating, and her feeble attitude and weary manner became agitated and excited—"I owe a duty, not to your name or to my name; nor to your descent or to my descent; not to prejudices, to traditions, or to family usages; not even to our two aching hearts;—but to the word I pledged to your mother, Conrad; to my personal honour, to my individual dignity; to my own sentiment of right and wrong, irrespective of all else; and that duty I will discharge, no matter what it costs me—even if I die under it. I will sacrifice my self-respect to nothing—not even to my love. Alas, my Conrad, that you should have to suffer too!"

"Dearest, dearest Claire," he replied, feeling the uselessness of discussion at such a moment,

"you have promised to hear all the facts, to discuss all the arguments. I can ask no more from you. I will not permit myself to doubt that we shall convince you."

Claire gently shook her head. She was, once more, strengthless and tired.

"Will you ask my aunt," she said, "to come and tell me all about it? She alone can do so. I need to know now. I had made up my mind not to speak to her about it until I got a little stronger; but these new events make it necessary that I should learn all without further delay."

Harriet Brandon came. She kissed Claire with much agitation, saying, "Dearest child, you know now that you have got your rights again, at last. Oh, may this most unexpected change give you peace and render you happy! I left it to Conrad to tell you of it precisely, because of the influence it cannot fail to exercise on your position towards him."

"You may think it right, Tatte," she answered, shaking her head slowly and despondingly, "to use that language to me; but, in reality, all this change is nothing; you know

that as well as I do. Mere money possessions cannot bring me joy. If this had happened before I saw Conrad, I might have found a real satisfaction in obtaining a home; though it would have been very cruel, in any case, to go back to Hurley under the frightful circumstances of my uncle's death. But now, Tatte, now, nothing can be useful to me, nothing can serve me, nothing can soothe me—except to find out about the marriage. You do not know yet, you have not perceived yet, what has been the effect on me of . . . of what you told me at Ems. I scarcely have discerned myself, even, how broken I am. I have a presentiment that, when I do discern it, when I discern it thoroughly and completely, in all its consequences and in all its meanings, I shall be unable to stand up under it. To have beheld before me such resplendent happiness—and to have lost it! Ah, Tatte, Tatte! money is a mockery. But all this makes it more urgent that I should be acquainted with my own story. Tell it to me —in all its details."

Harriet Brandon began the tale.

Claire listened in silence, excepting when,

here and there, she asked for explanation on a point she did not understand.

When her aunt had finished she reflected for a time. Then she asked that Mr Gray should be sent for.

As soon as he appeared, Claire said to him, "I wish, if you please, so put three questions to you. I shall be grateful if you will have the goodness to reply to them by simple yes or no.

"Firstly, if I understand correctly, the verdict of the jury was, that the marriage of my parents was not proved, and the meaning—though not, perhaps, the exact wording—of the judgment which was given in consequence of that verdict, was, that I am not, legally, my father's daughter. Is that so, Mr Gray?"

"That is so, Miss Brandon."

"Secondly, can that judgment be set aside, in any way whatever, without producing legal proof of the marriage?"

"I fear not, Miss Brandon."

"Thirdly, that being the state of the case, the declaration made by Mr George Brandon, in his will, changes my position in absolutely nothing. It is a manifestation of personal

opinion on the part of Mr George Brandon, but it has no legal effect whatever on me. Is that the truth, Mr Gray?"

"In law, in pure law, that is, of course, the truth, Miss Brandon. But still, the declaration is very important, as explaining the object and intention of the will."

"Thank you very much, Mr Gray. That is all I have to ask you."

Then Claire turned again to her aunt.

"I suppose, Tatte," she observed, "we shall be obliged to go to England, as soon as I can travel. I hope your throat is sufficiently well, now, to enable you to stand the climate; for a time, at all events. And I suppose, also, that we must fix our home at Hurley. There, at all events, I shall not have to hide; for every one will know all about me. What do you think?"

"I think so too, my darling, though I dread the emotions we shall have to pass through on getting there. But it seems to me that the first question to be dealt with is that of your marriage. All the rest is unimportant in comparison with that."

"That question is decided," answered Claire,

softly and steadily. "I cannot be the wife of Conrad. I know now all that I can learn about myself, and no discussion can affect my determination. I told Conrad I would listen to arguments; but, as no arguments can alter facts, it would be idle to go on reasoning."

"It is very true, my dear child, that arguments cannot alter facts; but they can give new shapes to the opinions that are deduced from facts. Facts may not be discussible; but opinions are. It is about the opinions, not about the facts, that we all want to argue with you."

Claire sighed deeply.

"My task is hard enough and painful enough," she said plaintively, "without having it made still more difficult and still more cruel by the opposition of every one around me. I need support, not resistance."

Her aunt put her arms round her, caressed her, and whispered to her, "Support, darling? Lean on me. My whole self is here for no other purpose than to sustain you in the trial which I, alas! have created for you."

Claire had been overstrained by the agitations of the afternoon. She had gone through

too much for her weak state. She laid her head upon her aunt's shoulder; she tried to take her hand; but suddenly she broke down; she burst hysterically into sobs, and was so exhausted when, after some minutes, the attack passed off, that she had to remain in entire quiet.

Harriet Brandon passed the evening watching her.

The others went on talking, with keen interest, about all that happened, and especially about Claire's continued refusal to go on with the marriage, which Count Hohenwalden had reported to them, with the details of his conversation with Claire.

"All this," proclaimed Madame de Rochedure, excitedly, "is the consequence of putting what Claire calls 'will' into the place of common-sense. Who but Claire would sacrifice not only her own peace, but that of Count Hohenwalden also, because of a doubt about her father's marriage? It is absurd to pretend that she gave a pledge to Countess Hohenwalden. We must drag her out of this. We have no more right to stand still and look on silently at her exaggerations, than to let

her tumble into a pond and drown before our eyes without trying to save her. I used to think she was capable of guiding me in my own troubles; but now it occurs to me that, on the contrary, it is I who must guide her."

"Which means," observed Madame d'Héristal, drily, "that she thinks she is right, and that you think she is wrong."

"Claire has a very peculiar nature," remarked M. de Morvan. "As I was a spectator of its formation,—as I had, indeed, the privilege of aiding in its development,—I venture to imagine that I know something of its inner springs, and I assert, not only that no advantage can be gained, but that much harm may be done, by placing ourselves in open antagonism to her in a matter of such supreme gravity and of such very special delicacy. Let me urge upon you that she must be dealt with prudently. The strain upon her is so intense that she can support no rough handling. She threw herself into love with all the palpitating emotionality of her temperament; and now she has rushed to duty, not only, if I judge correctly, because it is duty—as she sees it, at least—but also because it is the sole refuge

from broken love which is open to such a nature as hers. The events of to-day seem to have confirmed her idea of duty. Anyhow, they have overtaxed her strength. For the present, at all events, I think we should leave her alone."

"But we all agreed that we should argue with her," insisted Madame de Rochedure.

"I, personally, did not agree," replied M. de Morvan. "No agreement could be reached, on such a point, before we knew what effect would be produced upon her by this news. Now that we do know it, I repeat that, in my judgment, we had better remain silent for a time."

"I shall be very glad," put in Conrad, "if you would kindly leave it all to me."

"Very well," exclaimed Madame de Rochedure. "As I am neither silly nor ill-tempered, I shall not attempt to do battle against you all. I shall hold my tongue to Claire. But, under such exciting circumstances, it is impossible for me, with my nature—I, too, have a nature, Monsieur de Morvan—to sit still and do nothing. I shall therefore carry into execution an idea which has just sprung into my brain, and to

which not one of you can offer an objection. I shall go back at once to France, and shall set to work to find out the marriage. When I have discovered it—and I tell you I *shall* discover it—then Claire can listen to her love, and will, I suppose, be exceedingly obliged to me, and I, at last, shall have done something useful."

CHAPTER XXIII.

Next day Madame de Rochedure had a conversation with Harriet Brandon.

She began by asking her what the English and French detectives had really done at Rouen.

When she had heard the details of their proceedings, she said, "My dear friend, I am a person of imagination, and consequently I have invented a theory about all this. I have become convinced that the marriage was not performed at Rouen at all, or indeed anywhere in its immediate neighbourhood. It was not there that your brother lived. It was in France, of course — it cannot have been in any other country. But it was not at Rouen. He and his servant adopted that place as an address, but merely as an address —their home was somewhere else; therefore

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the marriage was somewhere else. In their anxiety to conceal the marriage, of course they concealed their home. Rouen was simply the place where they received their letters —Poste Restante, remember — that was all. Of course they had a motive for choosing Rouen for that purpose, and that motive can only have been that it was easy of access from the point where they really did live. When I say easy of access, I mean, naturally, by railway. There are now so many railways—main lines and branch lines—round Rouen, north and south of the Seine, that I could not enumerate them without a map. But how many of them were open at the time of the marriage? That is the first question, and I can only obtain an answer to it when I reach Paris. All I can say, meanwhile, is, that Colonel Brandon may have had his home on any one of the lines which were then working, or in any place in communication with those lines. According to my theory, he may have lived even in Paris itself, or Dieppe, or Havre, or Evreux—if there was a railway there — or anywhere else you like. There is only one limit to the area of

country within which he may have been established, and that is the possibility of getting, without excessive difficulty, to the Poste Restante at Rouen. Your detectives did not see the case in that light; they imagined, as you did, that the marriage took place at Rouen itself, or somewhere very near it. I say, on the contrary, that Rouen had nothing whatever to do with it, and that the sole use of Rouen, as a clue—and, remember, there is no other clue whatever—is to indicate to us that the real place lay somewhere within a circle of some thirty or forty miles round Rouen. I say thirty or forty miles, because that distance corresponds to about two hours by slow train, which is amply enough for concealment, and about as much as your brother would have cared to travel (both ways, remember) each time he wanted to post or to receive a letter. If the place had been accessible by road from Rouen, it would have been necessarily within a few miles, and we cannot doubt that, in that case, it would have been discovered by your detectives. Of course I am not going to imitate what was done twenty years ago, and to try to hunt it out myself. My idea is to

try something new, to utilise the system of bill-sticking, which is admirably organised throughout France, with a central agency in Paris, and to put up posters in every village in the departments through which railways then ran from Rouen, offering ten thousand francs reward for evidence of the marriage. French peasants—and most other peasants too, I fancy—will take a good deal of trouble for ten thousand francs. The bills will be seen, and stared at, and talked about, by every soul in the country. Advertisements may or may not be read—at the best they are noticed by only a few people; but great posters on all the walls in all the towns and hamlets will strike every passer-by; they will be feverishly discussed at every fireside and in every market-place. Imagine—ten thousand francs! What do you say, Miss Brandon, to my scheme?"

"I say that it is ingenious, and even that it sounds reasonable. But we have tried already—tried most determinedly—and have failed. Twenty-three years have passed since the marriage. Few persons can have known anything about it at the time—because it was, of course,

kept as secret as possible—and those few have had time to die."

"But the books remain—the books in which the marriage was inscribed. It is in the books that we shall find it. We can indicate the date approximatively; we know that it was in the spring of 1859. The registers will be examined everywhere, both in the Mairies and in the churches, by local people, in the hope of gaining the ten thousand francs. Your detectives were incapable idiots, my dear friend; they simply made what they called 'personal inquiries.' I, on the contrary, shall enlist the entire population in my service; therefore I shall succeed where they failed. I am really a very superior policeman."

"Well, it is very good of you to try," observed Harriet Brandon, languidly. "Of course you will allow me to place at your disposal whatever money may be necessary for the attempt. I cannot let you bear the cost of it."

"By all means," laughed Madame de Rochedure. "Provided you leave me to carry on the investigation in my own way, I will permit you to expend as much as you like. I will work and you shall pay."

"And when do you mean to begin?" asked Harriet Brandon.

"Now, at once. I shall not lose a day. I shall put the detailed management into the hands of my own notary, a most reliable man. The bills will be up in a week. Everybody will rush to look at the registers. If we are lucky, we shall have found it all out in ten days, and have the proofs in our hands in a fortnight."

"You are very energetic, my dear Marquise, and singularly hopeful."

"My dear friend," replied Madame de Rochedure, "that is my 'nature,' as M. de Morvan calls it. But, furthermore, I am particularly impelled by the notion of being useful for the first time in my life. That I should ever be useful to anybody seems to me altogether stupendous; and that I should be useful to Claire, of all people, trebles the stupendousness. Besides, it is so amusing to be a detective. I have always had a longing that way since I read Gaboriau's novels. Now I have got a case of my own! I wonder if I shall become celebrated?"

"I wish I could be as enthusiastic as you are," remarked Harriet Brandon.

"Enthusiastic! That is not the word to apply to me. My state of mind is in no way fervid; it is composed simply of the proper healthy curiosity which every true woman ought to possess, and of very earnest interest in Claire and her future. As I have just said, it is a privilege for an idler like me to find something to do — something that is worth doing; but there is no enthusiasm in that. Can I go to Claire?"

"Most certainly."

Madame de Rochedure went in and explained her "theory" to Claire.

Claire tried to smile, but could not. She expressed, however, warm thanks, and said, "It would indeed be strange, Jeanne, if I were to owe to you the happiness of my life. Alas! I dare not hope."

Then the scheme was told to Conrad and to Madame d'Héristal and M. de Morvan.

They were more sanguine than Claire or her aunt. It seemed to them that, as Madame de Rochedure argued, such a plan could not fail

to provoke researches in every village; that it would be the subject of universal gossip; that the chance of so easily earning so large a sum would cause careful investigations to be made, even in the most out-of-the-way places; and that, provided the marriage had really been performed in any of the departments where the bills were to be posted, the proof of it could scarcely fail to be discovered.

Conrad was particularly struck by the simplicity and the reasonableness of the project. He had felt, from the first, that it was indispensable to renew the attempt; and it seemed to him that it could not be undertaken in a surer or more practical form. In his eager longing to see it carried quickly to success, he asked Madame de Rochedure if he could help.

"To stick up bills?" she inquired, mockingly. "My dear Count, a good deal of practice is required to glue a bill properly on a wall. You would crumple and tear the paper, and you would cover your waistcoat with paste. No, you cannot help, in any way. But if —in the immense intensity of your desire not to lose an instant when the glorious telegram arrives announcing to us that somebody has

earned the ten thousand francs—it would be soothing to you to await the result in Paris, I shall be particularly delighted to see you there. Only, I stipulate formally that, if you do come, you shall not go mad with excitement, and that you shall not visit me more than fifteen times a-day to ask for news."

"On second thoughts, I will not go," replied Conrad. "I will remain with Claire until she starts for England. This recommencement of inquiries will justify me in asking her to leave the future undecided until a result is attained. No, Marquise, I will stop here. But I thank you with all my heart."

"Well, I think I shall start to-morrow. So, if any of you have suggestions to make, you must tell me this evening."

When Claire came into the sitting-room, in the afternoon, she said to Conrad, very sadly, "I am deeply grateful to Madame de Rochedure. But I am incapable of any hope whatever. I am utterly despondent. It seems to me that no effort can lead us to success, and that I am predestined to disappointment. As Jeanne talks of a solution in ten days or a

fortnight, we shall not have to wait long to learn that we have failed again; and as I shall scarcely be fit to undertake the journey to England sooner than that, we can remain here without wasting time. We will ask Mr Gray to go back and to make the necessary arrangements."

Then she stopped. Her expression became even sadder than before. After a few moments, she added, "Meanwhile . . . Conrad . . . we must not see each other. My heart weeps to say so to you—yet I say it."

"I entreat you, Claire," he cried, "to postpone all decision — all consideration of the question even — until this attempt has been fairly made. It *may* succeed. You cannot deny that success is possible. Why, then, should we not wait, in hope and in affection, for the issue? I have not attempted yet to reason with you; but I have, indeed, much to urge. When you have heard me it will be impossible for you to maintain your resolution to reject me. But surely it would be useless to submit ourselves to the pain of such a discussion so long as this present dream encourages us. My mother's death has much un-

nerved me. May we not use our love to soothe each other? We both need it, Claire."

"Ah, Conrad!" sighed Claire, "do you remember that once, in the beginning, we spoke of conflict between love and duty? Little did we imagine then that we ourselves should have to face that conflict."

"But where is the duty, Claire? I can see neither it nor the conflict. Nothing is visible to me except our love."

"The duty is in my conscience, Conrad. It has in it no element of external things. It is the outcome of my own responsibility to myself. I passed my girlhood in struggling to acquire the power of perceiving and of doing my duty. I see it clear and plain before me now, like a light in the night. With the aid of God and of my own will, I shall not fail to discharge it."

"It is altogether insufficient, Claire, for you to declare that *you* see it. That might be enough if the duty affected yourself alone. But in this case, what you call your duty does not concern yourself alone. A love has arisen between us which has altered our two lives. We depend upon each other. We cannot

separate our feelings or our action. I do not wish to go into the subject at present. I trust that the discovery of the marriage will render it unnecessary to go into it at all. But if the attempt should not succeed, I shall call upon you then, with all the earnestness of the love I bear you, to listen while I speak. Until then, why do you drive me from your presence?"

Claire held out her hand to him, and mournfully, feebly, tried to smile.

"I ought not to listen at all, Conrad," she said. "I ought to resist all temptation. And yet I yield—for the moment. If, as you dare to hope, the proof is found, there will be, for us both, a joy as glorious as the flowering of the summer. But if the proof is not found, we shall simply have deferred the parting hour. I consent to wait — because I love. Oh, how much sorrow can enter into love! On that bright day at Nassau, you told me you supposed there might be shapes of trial which love would only embitter and augment. One of those shapes of trial has come upon us. Ah, Conrad! we did not foresee that day—that we ourselves were to be its victims."

A week afterwards a letter arrived from Madame de Rochedure. They all came hastily together to hear it read. It said—

"My Friends,—I seek in vain through history for a woman as astonishing as I am.

"I am more persevering than day and night, more systematic than the tides, more inventive than imagination.

"My notary listened to me with admiration when I expounded my scheme to him. It is true I had a bonnet which was a foam of budding roses, and a rapturous pearl-grey dress, and that a notary—in spite of his being a notary—may have in him some of the feelings of a man.

"We have begun.

"The bill is printed. I gave as much attention to its composition as if it had been a gown for next Sunday's races.

"After a profound study of the comparative influences of various colours on the vision; after testing the most frantic mixtures of tints; after going down on purpose to the forest of Fontainebleau to carry out experiments, at five hundred yards' distance, on the

relative eye-attracting powers of all the shades of orange, red, sky-blue, and emerald, I selected for the paper a newly invented hue called 'lightning-lit sun-rays.' It is a yellow of such outrageous exorbitancy that I cannot look at it without winking.

"The bill is six feet high and three feet wide. It looks, from afar, like the opened door of a furnace; and I feel confident that men, women, and children will leave their ploughs, their washing, and their mud-pies, and run madly across the fields to contemplate its blaze.

"The upper half is entirely occupied by three lines, like this—

TEN THOUSAND
FRANCS

REWARD.

"Reward is in letters eighteen inches high.

"The effect is prodigious.

"Then follows a statement of what is wanted; very condensed, very distinct, very easy to understand.

"It finishes with the address of the notary to whom information is to be sent.

"Fifteen thousand bills are printed. They go away to-night from Paris, and will be stuck up to-morrow.

"I find that in 1859 the only railways running into Rouen were those from Paris, Dieppe, and Havre, with the branch to Fécamp. It was not possible to reach Evreux and the Cherbourg line, except by going round through Mantes, which made the distance so great that it puts that line practically outside the inquiry.

"Consequently, according to my computations, Colonel Brandon must have been married at some place in one of the departments through which those railways passed; that is to say, the Seine Inférieure, the Seine, Seine-et-Oise, and the north-eastern parts of the Eure. No other districts can be considered to have been accessible, at that time, from Rouen. It is therefore to those districts only that the bills will be sent.

"My dear friends, although I laugh about it—because it is my 'nature' to laugh at everything—I am, in my heart, most frightfully anxious and excited. Now that I am alone, away from you all, I perceive that I

have taken an awful responsibility on myself.

"But—imagine—if I *do* succeed!!!

"I shall shriek, I shall shout, I shall sob—with delight.

"If I fail! . . . well, if I fail I shall go away and hide myself, in shame and contrition.

"To each of you my sincere friendship.

"To Claire my tender, earnest, deep esteem and affection. JEANNE DE ROCHEDURE."

"What a picture of herself that letter is!" remarked Madame d'Héristal. "It is the same mixture of exaggeration, frivolity, intelligence, and real goodness."

"Her plan is extremely practical and wise," said M. de Morvan. "It is scarcely possible to doubt that it will succeed if only the marriage was performed in the district she is trying. If it leads to nothing there, we ought to make the same attempt all over France. The system of double registration, at both the Mairie and the church, increases, of course, the chances of discovery. I am really beginning to think that we shall find it out by

this very simple but very complete process of inquiry."

Claire looked at him, gravely and sadly, but she did not speak.

Conrad watched her with growing surprise and disquiet, and asked himself, anxiously, what had become of the bright, buoyant temperament he had known at Ems. He was unable to comprehend why she showed so little resistance, so little elasticity, under the trial which had fallen on her; and why the strength that was left to her was concentrated on the cold idea of duty, to the exclusion of all other sentiments. It appeared to him that her heart had ceased to guide either her actions or her wishes, and that she had fallen under the government of pure reason; that her will had become abstract, almost impersonal; that she was no longer animated, stimulated, dominated—as she had been—by love alone.

But though he was unable to understand, he could not attempt to relieve his anxiety by questioning her. He himself had begged that all discussion should stand over. For the moment he could only gaze at her mourn-

fully, and wonder at the change which had come over her. The Claire that he had known seemed to have disappeared.

M. de Morvan spoke again. He said, "From to-day we may, at any instant, receive a telegram announcing the discovery."

At these words all their eyes turned instinctively towards Claire.

She sat perfectly still, and looked at the ground. She showed no interest in what was going on around her. Her passive indifference surprised and pained them.

As soon as Harriet Brandon was alone with her, she took her hand and whispered fondly, "Dearest, my darling, we are all so deeply grieved at the change in you. Why are you so beaten down? How is it that you—you, who were so brave—can now be so listless? I do not share the optimism of the others, but even I am obliged to admit that this plan *may* succeed. But you, my sweet child, appear quite unconcerned. Why is it? Can you tell me?"

"Yes, I can tell you—in part, at least. But is it worth while? Is anything worth while? I have had much time to think, and,

especially, to feel. It is not quite clear to me; nothing is quite clear; but I perceive vaguely that there are destinies which must be accepted, and that mine is one of them."

"But, Claire, my child, can it be *you* who speak in that way? You used to say that no difficulty should beat you, that you would struggle always."

"Quite true, Tatte. I used to say so—then. I no longer have the strength. So I cease to struggle."

"But we are struggling for you."

"Which means, my dear aunt, that you are allowing yourself to be enticed by dreams of the impossible."

"My poor child, my poor child!" exclaimed Harriet Brandon, "how lamentably altered you are!"

Claire sat up in her chair and looked steadily at her aunt.

"Listen," she said. "I will try to make you understand why I am altered. But it is so misty that I cannot be precise. I was living in peace, almost in joy, mindless of the past, confident in the present, hoping in the future. It is true that I had some doubts

about my own history; but those doubts had assumed no shape; if ever they approached one, it was a mere impression that I had lost money. In full belief of my personal worthiness I gave myself up to love. I loved with the outpour of my whole substance. I had tried, tried earnestly, to prepare myself for usefulness, for duty, for life. But I found that, without knowing it, I had only prepared myself for love. My love alone became use, duty, life, to me. A glorious rejoicing filled me that I was capable of such love. I told myself I did not merit to receive from him such love as his; but I did indeed exult that I could give to him such love as mine. Difficulties came. They saddened me, but there was nothing in them that could make me hesitate. His mother would not have me; but what did that matter — then? At last . . . you told me. I woke from a radiant dream to a reality so destroying, that instantly I broke under it. The preparation I had thought so reliable was of no aid to me. The will to which I had trusted, ahandoned me. My love remained — all else had disappeared. But, in remaining, my love turned

into anguish. All was gone; all was lost. I, who had always hoped so brightly, found suddenly, with terror, that I hoped no more. Oh, what an awful cold benumbed my heart when I became aware that hope had left me! You will tell me, Tatte, I know—Conrad, too, will tell me — that I am wrong, that I misjudge my situation, that what has happened is not really grave, that the declaration I made to his mother had no meaning and no value, that I exaggerate in attaching importance to it, that it would be wiser to take no notice of it, to marry . . . to be happy. To that I make but one reply — I cannot. I should despise, and abhor, and loathe myself if—being what I am, after saying what I said—I consented to become Conrad's wife. A happiness as immense as nature, as glowing as light, as steadfast as truth, appeared before me. For some few days I threw myself into joy, with thanksgiving to God and Conrad. Then . . . I knew about myself. The knowledge uprooted me. I withered under it like a torn-up plant. Illness came. All crumbled round me. Recovery brought me thought once more, and thought has taught

me that my grief is incurable. The proof will never be obtained — of that I am certain. Without the proof I will not take the name of Conrad. I said I would not bear it if my birth was not honourable. That is why I am changed. I can tell you no more now. I am weak and weary. At some other time I will try to make it clearer to you."

With tears, Harriet Brandon stooped over Claire, and caressed her softly, and whispered, many times, "My darling, my darling, my child."

. . . . . .

Day followed day; but no news came. Each post brought a few lines from Madame de Rochedure. She wrote feverishly. The strain of her excitement was evidently very great.

Conrad was deeply agitated.

Claire appeared to be growing more and more sad; there were moments when the expression of her face was cruelly distressing; but she was quite calm. She gained strength steadily, and talked of being able to leave Wiesbaden in a few days.

The others spoke together of nothing but the proofs.

M. de Morvan insisted that if the experiment round Rouen produced no result, a similar essay ought to be made, as he had already suggested, throughout the whole surface of France. He argued that, as it was impossible to doubt the reality of the marriage, as all the circumstances pointed to the probability that it had been performed somewhere in France (if not near Rouen), and as the consequences of failing to trace it were threatening to become so grave, it was essential to follow out every possible channel of research.

Madame d'Héristal was of the same general opinion as her brother, but she saw more difficulties than he did. She pointed out that, after all, they could not assert that the marriage had positively been celebrated in France; there was only a probability of it; in reality, it might have been in Belgium or Italy, or anywhere else. She urged particularly, also, that, as they were ignorant of the family name of Colonel Brandon's wife, they could indicate only *his* name in the bills or advertisements; and that, to seek for evidence of a marriage which was supposed to have taken place somewhere in France, nearly a quarter

of a century before, with no information to guide the searchers except the name of an Englishman, was not an undertaking which offered much promise of success.

Conrad listened, bit his lips, and said nothing. He spent most of his time at the door, looking down the street to see if a messenger from the telegraph office was coming towards the hotel.

Harriet Brandon repeated to them all the substance of her last conversation with Claire, and expressed the opinion that she was so deadened by the blow she had received, that she had lost, for the time, all faculty of effort, or even of desire. She seemed almost to imply, by her apathetic attitude, that she did not wish inquiries to be continued, and that she acquiesced in the ruin of her happiness.

"The workings in us are very puzzling," said Madame d'Héristal, meditatively. "I have seen a good deal of them in my experience of men and women; but I fancy I am still as far from the end of them as if I had never begun. I should have supposed that, of all people I have known, Claire would have been the strongest to battle against suf-

fering, the foremost to strike down obstacles. Yet she—the valiant, brave-souled Claire—has fallen prostrate at her first encounter with trial."

"Yes, but what an encounter and what a trial!" observed M. de Morvan.

"I am not talking of the quality of the trouble," went on his sister. "That, of course, is special and frightful. I am speaking solely of the surprising fact that this most brilliant and most spirited nature, this nature that had sought, so resolutely, to prepare itself, as we all know, for the solid fight of life, is vanquished, without resistance, at the first engagement. As I have just said, it is a strange and unexpected experience to add to my stock. Poor Claire! Alas!"

Then they discussed, for the hundredth time, the chances of success of Madame de Rochedure's attempt, and the further measures to be taken if it failed.

By degrees they grew to recognise that, under all the circumstances, there would be considerable exaggeration, and even absurdity, in carrying out M. de Morvan's idea of putting up the bills all over France. The only indi-

cation they possessed pointed distinctly to Rouen. If that failed them, as it had failed Harriet Brandon twenty years before, there was nothing, absolutely nothing, to go upon. France was too big a country for it to be practicable to seek in every village.

After listening, again and again, to all these arguments, Harriet Brandon observed, with a sigh, "The sole acceptable supposition is, that the marriage was performed near Rouen, but that the measures taken to ensure secrecy were so complete that no traces were left behind."

"Yet, my dear friend," expostulated M. de Morvan, excitedly, "the traces *cannot* disappear. No precautions can efface them. The law prescribes that they shall be preserved. As Madame de Rochedure has told you, the registers remain for ever—unless, indeed, they happen to be burnt, as was the case, it is true, in Paris after the Commune. Of course, if Colonel Brandon got married in some village where there has since been a fire which has destroyed the books, then, in that case, the traces will have really vanished. But that is most improbable."

"Unfortunately," argued Harriet Brandon,

"the word 'probable' is useless to us. It seemed probable that the marriage was near Rouen; it seemed probable that we should unravel the mystery when we hunted there twenty years ago; it seemed probable that we might succeed by the new effort we are making now; it seemed probable that the registers would, as you say, supply us with a source of information which could not disappear. And yet we have learnt nothing. So, when you talk of the improbability of a fire, I am unable to agree with you. After the experience I have had of this extraordinary case, I feel justified in saying that anything is probable, and that anything is improbable. There is nothing to guide us. Everything has broken down. And this new scheme—and all other schemes—will break down too."

"To me," observed Conrad Hohenwalden, "all this means, simply, that we must go on until we do succeed. I do not speak of myself—I speak of Claire alone. Her very life may depend on our procuring the proofs."

"Go on—go on," said Madame d'Héristal, ironically. "It is very easy to talk of going on. But how are you to do it? What else

are we to try? I thought myself, at first, that we might explore all France. But I perceive now that it would be ridiculous to carry out such an idea; it is too big and too useless. It would be a pure waste of time, of trouble, of money, and, worse than all, of hope. Hope is not a feeling to play with. As we said just now, it is Rouen, or nowhere; and Rouen and its districts are being tested to the bottom by Madame de Rochedure's bills."

Conrad Hohenwalden walked to the window; looked to see if a telegram was coming; and drummed his fingers fretfully on the glass.

Ten days passed.

A fortnight passed.

It became manifest that the attempt had failed.

Claire remained very calm.

She said one morning to her aunt, "I used to think that controlled will was the highest faculty I could desire to possess. I have discovered now that there is something else which is, in certain extremities of suffering, a more valuable possession still. That something else is—resignation. I am endeavouring to acquire it. But I have not got it yet. Until it comes

to me, I must continue to use what remains to me of will."

Then she thought. After a while she added, "It seems to me that I am fit to travel. When would you like to leave?"

Harriet Brandon looked at her before she answered, but could detect no appearance of any particular emotion in her. She showed her habitual sadness, nothing more. Then she said, "Whenever you feel strong enough, my dear child."

"To-morrow, then, if you please. It has to be done. Let me do it."

Conrad was informed immediately, by Harriet Brandon, of this decision. He did his utmost to be cool, and asked if he could see Claire.

The question was carried to her by her aunt.

She answered, "I was on the point of sending for him. Now, at once, if he will."

He came. It was evident that he restrained his excitement with extreme difficulty.

Claire began,—"Conrad . . . my Conrad . . . the hour has arrived. . . . We have to part. No . . . no . . . do not interrupt me . . . I entreat you. My task is

above my strength . . . help me . . . help me. Do not augment my unbearable burden. I have thought . . . oh, so long and so sadly! I have waited . . . waited, partly because you desired delay; . . . partly . . . because . . . my heart feared and hesitated. At last, . . . oh, to have to say it! . . . at last . . . the delay is ended; . . . ended . . . like everything else. I cannot speak to you of my love, Conrad. It is not the time . . . and . . . and . . . I could not trust myself. I have to speak to you of duty . . . of nothing else but duty. Aid me, my Conrad; aid me to do my duty. Aid me, as the highest conceivable demonstration of your love. Do not weaken me. Do not talk to me of love. I cannot bear to hear it. Once . . . when I had the right to do it . . . I did talk to you of love. I poured out to you the passion of my spirit, my heart's life, my own whole self. Now . . . all that is finished. Now . . . I have put away the love. It is still there, Conrad; still there for ever. But I must not listen to it. Now, duty alone directs me. It has indeed been hard to bring myself to duty; but I have attained it. I call upon you—I

count upon you—to support me in it. Pray for me . . . as I shall pray . . . unceasingly . . . for you. For the last time . . . farewell! I beg of you . . . for both our sakes . . . to go away to-day . . . Farewell . . . Conrad! . . . Farewell . . . for ever!"

She held her hands to him.

Her pallor was ghastly. Her whole form trembled. But her resolve was absolute. For the instant, her will had conquered human feebleness.

Conrad had listened in overpowering passion, distracted, frantic.

"Farewell? . . ." he gasped, seizing her hands and staring wildly at her. "Farewell? . . . Farewell, for ever? . . . Duty? . . . Support you? . . . You use those words to *me?* . . . I refuse. . . . Before God, I refuse. . . . I claim you for my wife."

Claire withdrew her hands, stood back, and lifted up her head to its full height, her eyes fixed on him.

"No, Conrad," she answered, gently. "I will not be your wife."

"You *shall* be!" shouted Conrad, maddened, desperate.

Claire stood back still farther.

She looked at him with such intensity of resolution, mixed with such appealing love, that he shivered under her gaze.

She held out her hands once more.

"Farewell, Conrad, I say. If you will not leave *me* . . . I must leave *you*. . . . Which shall it be? . . . I offer you the choice . . . before I decide myself."

"I will not go!" he cried.

"Conrad," she murmured, in a low slow voice — "Conrad, this is the first weakness you have shown me. This is the first regret you have caused me . . . It is for me . . . to go."

With an effort that seemed almost to rend her life from her, she turned towards the door.

He sprang before her and stopped her.

"Conrad," she said, with awful gravity, "on your conduct at this moment will depend some part — a large part, perhaps — of the memory I shall retain of you. Be worthy of yourself. . . . I can no longer ask you to be worthy of me. I will *never* fail. Are you more weak than I? Conrad . . . stand aside . . . and let me pass."

He fixed his eyes upon her — in despair. Then his head dropped. He tottered. He stood aside.

She took his hand . . . once more. She looked at him . . . once more. She spoke . . . once more, "May God have pity on us!" And then she was no longer there.

An hour later Count Hohenwalden had quitted Wiesbaden.

Next morning Madame d'Héristal and her brother started for Paris.

Claire and her aunt left for Brussels in the afternoon, on their way to England.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Look, Claire! look, darling! there is the house!" exclaimed Harriet Brandon, as they drove from Lorston to Hurley. "There is the house. You can see it now, on the hill, through the trees. And, Claire, Claire . . . here . . . here . . . on the left . . . behind that wood . . . is Hurley village . . . and the cottage . . . where you were brought by Berthe."

The scene before her, the memories it recalled, aroused in Harriet Brandon extreme agitation. Her voice shook; her eyes filled with silent tears. But she succeeded, by a great effort, in preventing herself from bursting into sobs.

Claire was very pale; her lips were tightened; her hand was pressed upon her heart. Yet she retained, externally, the dreary composure she had assumed since her illness.

She glanced in the direction indicated by her aunt, but she did not speak.

In silence they passed through the park.

They reached the house.

It happened that Claire was the first to leave the carriage. She waited for her aunt and took her arm, so that they might enter side by side and seem to take possession as a collective act.

Inside the door, Claire stopped.

With all her will, the solemnity of the moment weighed her down. It made her, for an instant, incapable of going on.

A prayer—a renewal of her unceasing supplication for resignation—formed itself within her. It was her first desire in her new home.

After an instant she looked round the hall.

She had a misty consciousness of oak-walls and ceiling, of a wide staircase, of servants standing in a row. But nothing was distinct. The nature of her relation to outer things had changed; she no longer knew them by her senses, but only by her feelings; by her impressions, not by her perceptions.

Then she was aware that her aunt was telling her that the old butler, who was standing be-

fore her, twisting his fingers timidly together, had been at Hurley with the General.

She shook hands with him and said, half dreamily, that she was pleased to see him, and was glad he had been there so long.

She spoke, too, a few words to the others, but did not realise that she was their mistress.

Her next duty was to go over the house. The process awakened in her a certain curiosity and augmented somewhat her emotion; but both curiosity and emotion were dull; they had no eagerness in their composition. Her only clear sensation was that it had to be done; so she did it.

She found flowers everywhere, and knew that they were meant to greet her. In a vague fashion, she felt it was kind to welcome her with flowers.

As they went through the rooms, her aunt suggested a few modifications of arrangement; not so much because she wished for them (the old house could hardly be improved, in her eyes), but in order to say something, and to endeavour to lead Claire to occupy her thoughts about her new home. It did seem to Claire, inattentive as she was, that there was a

great deal to change; but yet, she scarcely looked or cared. Her foreign eyes could not help perceiving a heaviness in the shapes and colours and materials of the furniture; an oppressive uniformity in the placing of the chairs, the sofas, and the tables; a general awkwardness of grouping, a general unsatisfactoriness of lines, of tones, of effects, of results; the whole system of the house seemed hard; there was nothing winning, nothing sympathetic to her, in it. In other days, in other states of mind, she would have instantly upset everything; have pulled squares into circles; have broken angles into curves; have suppressed all straightnesses; have destroyed all regularity and rule; have altered the relationship between themselves of all the objects in a room; have tried all sorts of fresh adjustments of tissues, stuffs, and folds—unaccustomed mixtures of tints and hues—contrasts of lights and darknesses, of sheen and shade—new placings, new positions, new uses for every ornament. She would have sought and found, at once, variety and charm and gladness—according to her views of them.

But—now?

She listened heedlessly; the uglinesses scarcely shocked her; she said Yes, or No, and did not care.

The old silver alone aroused in her a movement of her former artist's self. It was a famous treasure; the Hurley plate was known, by name at least, to all collectors; enthusiasts came from afar to look at it; many of the pieces had served as models and been copied. Claire did feel a little warming in her heart, a little passing satisfaction, a little momentary pride, to know that those admirable specimens of ancient work, assembled by Brandons of before, were hers.

The gardens, too, produced upon her an effect of soothing. Autumn had begun late; there were still leaves upon the trees, still flowers in the beds; in the greenhouses the show was bright. Claire thought it would comfort her to live with plants.

And when she had seen it all—there was so much to see that the afternoon was scarcely long enough—she put her hand once more upon her heart and murmured, "If he were here it would be a privilege to possess all this. But . . . he never can be here."

Then they came in, as the night fell, and sat together, and held each other's hands. Harriet Brandon cried. Claire's eyes were dry.

It seemed to Claire, now that it was done, that it was only an empty form—a ceremony. For her there could be no home.

The dinner was silent and gloomy.

Sadly the evening passed away.

At last, Claire was alone in her room.

She tried to think, but found that, more and more, she was losing the faculty of analysis. She had a consciousness that she was crushed; no other sentiment was apparent to her; and even that one was confused. She remembered, vaguely, that at Wiesbaden she had told her aunt she expected the trial would be heavier than her strength could bear. That idea, though quite obscure, pressed upon her with such dull persistence, that she found herself almost unable to pursue any other conception. She recognised that the thread of reason, which once had been so strong in her, was breaking. Even the strangeness of the position in which she found herself that day, even the entire newness of her surround-

ings, even the unaccustomed little details of the life to which she had been brought so suddenly, failed to kindle in her any precise idea. Everything she felt was incomplete, except her sadness. The dim knowledge that her existence was destroyed was her sole durable sensation.

Then she tried to turn, as if for solace, to her love; but love increased her anguish. Love was the cause; anguish was the result; and the result seemed even more frightful when she allowed herself to dwell upon the cause.

Her woe that night was profound.

Life at Hurley did not commence hopefully.

She asked herself, almost with terror, how it would end.

Next morning Harriet Brandon proposed to Claire to drive down to the village and see the cottage.

To please her aunt she went; but she felt no interest.

The cottage was altogether changed. It had been inhabited for years by people from Lorston. A storey had been added to it; a new dining-room had been built at one end and a new greenhouse at the other. The old

creepers were all gone; the walls were naked; trees had been cut down; the garden did not seem the same.

Harriet Brandon sighed deeply.

"It is a desecration," she murmured. "This is not my dear cottage; that is not the door through which you passed, my Claire, to come, and go away again. No, no, this is not it at all; I cannot show it to you like that. We will not ask to go in. Do not let us stop; it is too painful."

They walked through the village, and found three or four old people of Harriet Brandon's time. But with those few exceptions the inhabitants were strangers to her. The village seemed as altered as the cottage. Lorston had come out there, and had put up two manufactories and several square houses. As a property it had acquired value; and Mr Cumber explained to them, a few days later, with much pride, that the income from the village alone had increased by nearly £1600. But to Harriet Brandon it was no longer Hurley. She went back, shocked and pained, and told Berthe indignantly that the village had become almost a town.

Later in the day a letter came from Madame d'Héristal. It announced that a meeting had been held in Paris between Madame de Rochedure, Madame d'Héristal, M. de Morvan, and the notary. The question of the marriage had been discussed anew, in all its aspects, and they had arrived, with extreme unwillingness and distress, at the conviction that further search was useless. The notary had urged that, as the Rouen clue had failed again, there was no other to be followed; and had insisted, particularly, that they were not even sure that the marriage had been performed in France at all. Under such circumstances, after so many years had passed, it appeared to him quite hopeless to continue.

Added to the letter was a note from M. de Morvan, stating that he had forwarded to Count Hohenwalden a report of the conversation with the notary.

When they had read the letter, Harriet Brandon and Claire looked at each other.

"It is finished," murmured Claire. "I knew it was. There is nothing left to me but duty. Duty done is the only counterpoise to pain. I will try to work for others

—as he does. That will be another bond between us."

She began at once. In a week she had obtained a rough measure of the wants and the resources of the people round her. Her knowledge of Continental ways of aiding the poor enabled her to suggest new forms of action. With the aid of the vicar of Hurley, of the village doctor, and of an intelligent young woman who was mistress at the school, she established, before a month had passed, classes for cookery and sewing for the girls, and for teaching special trades to the boys. Amusing lectures were given to all the children on elementary science and physical geography. Then she set up a reading-room for the men, and a store-room for lending linen and household utensils to the women. Her next essay was a free dispensary, with warm baths. To it was attached, soon afterwards, a cottage hospital with six beds. Prizes were distributed for many sorts of progress and capacity—even for clean babies.

As she paid for everything herself, she was able to avoid delays, and, by the time the winter was drawing to a close, she was reap-

ing harvest from the seed she had sown. She had the satisfaction of perceiving that she had produced good and brought about contentment; and though there was here and there amongst the lookers-on a little derision of the exaggeration of her proceedings, and especially of the foreignness of some of the usages she was trying to introduce, yet, on the whole, she did not meet with as much jealousy or ill-will as her experience of the world had led her to expect.

Yet, of all the persons affected by her attempts, she was herself the one who gained the least. She was occupied, but not gladdened; employed, but not contented; interested, but not soothed. She recognised more and more, as the months passed by, that even the remedy of incessant occupation, "the surest medicine of the soul," had no effect upon her. Her case was outside the influence of treatment.

Harriet Brandon was in regular correspondence with Count Hohenwalden, and kept him acquainted with all that was going on. Claire refused to read his communications to her aunt. She never wrote to him, and when, twice, a

letter from him came to her, she declined to open it. She declared she would not be weakened.

Her combat with herself was incessant; but not one step backwards did she make; her courage never yielded.

The Valonas came to see them from time to time, and Madame d'Héristal and M. de Morvan arrived, on a long visit, soon after Christmas. The two latter were inclined at first to think that Claire was not in a worse state than when they had parted from her at Wiesbaden. Physically she was better—for she had gained strength, was able to walk, and sometimes even, for an instant, carried her head as in the old days. But as they saw more clearly into her condition, they became aware that her outside aspect in no way corresponded to her interior state, that sadness was eating her away, that she was consumed by hopelessness, and that a complete break-down of her system might be expected at no distant date.

There was constant talk between them as to what could possibly be done; but though there were differences of opinion on certain points, they all agreed that, with such a nature as

Claire's, it was useless, under the special circumstances of the case, to try to persuade her to marry. They recognised that there was nothing before them but to wait and to hope in the future.

They tried to cheer Claire, but scarcely ever could their united efforts bring a faint smile into her face. And if, unwillingly, she did smile, she seemed ashamed of it a moment afterwards.

She consented very rarely to speak of her position. When she did allude to it, she used few words. No discussion with her was possible. Sometimes she would say, with a slight shudder—"I have met my destiny. I am endeavouring to accept it." At other moments she would tell them, gloomily—"I am fighting against fate. Fate will beat me; but I will struggle till I fall. You shall not say of me that I ran away."

The life she led was very regular and occupied, and yet, full as it was of tasks and objects, it seemed to herself to be almost entirely void. She felt a sort of liking for her work so long as she was face to face with it; the remnants of her will assisted her to labour and

to apply herself to details and to management; but as soon as she left her schools and workshops in the village, and took the wood path to the house, her gloom rushed back upon her, and the destruction of her life seemed even more complete because she had been thinking, for a while, of other things.

There was upon that path a bench between two old oak-trees. When summer came, she adopted it for her resting-place; the leaves —so thick that the breeze could scarcely make them rustle—shut out all view. She sat there often, while the uncounted hours passed away, and vaguely suffered.

Sometimes she made an effort to look into her position; but never did the effort last; attention failed her, and she wandered into shifting, varying fancies, all sombre, cheerless, hopeless.

Resistance had gone out of her. She had grown even to the conviction that it would be wrong to struggle; that her duty was to accept her doom, and to bear it, if possible, without repining. If her sorrow became, at certain moments, too cruel to be borne, then she had only to recover patience. Unceasing-

ly, she told herself that resignation was the utmost she could wish for.

Of late she had imposed upon herself the rule of refusing to consent to think of Conrad. But there were instants when memory and love seized hold of her with such force that, almost unknowingly, she gave way to them, and listened to their promptings with that "greater grief" which accompanies "the recollection of days of joy when we are in misery." At such instants her love overwhelmed her with suffering; it tossed her like a leaf driven about in air by storm-currents; like drifting spray falling back each instant into the breakers from which it rose; like a swimmer tossed by surging waves. At such instants all power of combat left her; she was the torn victim of despair. And after these intense attacks, her exhaustion was naturally more complete than ever, her self-abandonment more utter.

Then, slowly, she would rally again, and would try, once more, to throw herself into labour as a refuge.

At other times she would open the habitually closed piano, and sit before it, dreaming sometimes, playing sometimes, but playing

brokenly, fitfully, in unison with her spirit. The day was far away when she had felt that music was the highest, purest, most satisfying form of expression of emotion.

In the latter part of May, Madame de Rochedure arrived. Claire met her at Lorston station, and occupied herself so much about her, that it was not until the first day had passed that the Marquise found an opportunity of speaking privately to Harriet Brandon. She inquired very particularly about the condition of Claire, and went on to say that Count Hohenwalden had come to Paris before she started; that she had found him shockingly worn and changed; and that, after long discussion with him, it had been agreed between them that he should make another attempt to persuade Claire to consent to the marriage. She added that, in consequence, he had travelled with her to London, and was waiting there while she endeavoured to obtain Claire's permission for him to appear at Hurley.

The truth was that, during several days, Conrad had steadily refused to come, protesting that he would only offend Claire by doing so; but that Madame de Rochedure had im-

petuously insisted that he must "make an effort," and that, at last, in the sickened weariness of his spirit, he had unwillingly followed her advice.

This news terrified Harriet Brandon. She felt certain that Claire would be rendered still more wretched by a renewal of discussions with Conrad. She answered, vehemently, that Claire would not consent to see him, that she was fighting with all her might against her love for him, and that it would be cruel folly to expose her to the consequences of a meeting.

"But," urged Madame de Rochedure, "surely you will allow Claire herself to decide? Will you not speak to her about it?"

"No, most certainly not. Even if Claire were inclined to let him come (which I know she will not be), I would do my utmost to dissuade her. Never will she marry him. Why, then, should she be made to suffer from temptation?"

"How do you know that she will not marry him? Why should not Claire change her mind as other women change theirs?"

"Because Claire is Claire. Because she is

incapable of yielding to what she supposes to be wrong. She has made up her mind, after what has happened, that she ought not to be Conrad's wife; and she will not be Conrad's wife. That is what I know. After what I have done to make her suffer, I will do my utmost now to protect her from additional pain."

"Well, but let her form her own opinion about it. What harm can it do her to be told that Hohenwalden asks to plead his cause with her?"

"He has pleaded it already. He has said all he has to say. Claire did not give way before; she will not give way now. No, positively I will not tell her."

"Then I must tell her myself."

"I will not let you tell her," retorted Harriet Brandon, resolutely.

"My dear friend, be reasonable," persisted Madame de Rochedure. "The situation is not only unbearable; it is absurd. In common-sense Claire ought to marry him. There is no valid reason why she should not. All I ask of you is, that you will allow him to urge that on her. We cannot look on in silence at the

destruction of two lives. I have promised Hohenwalden to do my best for him."

"I refuse, Marquise."

"You place me in a very awkward position. I took it for granted that Claire would see him. Otherwise I would not have allowed him to accompany me to England. I was, indeed, so sure of it, that I wanted the poor fellow to come on with me at once to Lorston, so as to be ready there when I got authority for him to follow me here. But he declined, pretending that it was more delicate, more respectful to Claire, to stop in London. I left him there, in the most painful excitement. Really, it would be unfair to send him back to Austria without even letting her know that he is near her. He is a very noble fellow, and he deserves fair treatment."

"And Claire is a very noble woman, and deserves fair treatment too," exclaimed Harriet Brandon. "That Conrad Hohenwalden should wish to argue with her, I can well understand, but that Claire should consent to hear him is a different matter."

"That is precisely where you are wrong," urged Madame de Rochedure. "There is no

difference whatever in their respective situations. They are equally deserving of consideration and of sympathy. If Claire is right in refusing to marry him, he, most certainly, is right in claiming her for his wife. In fact, you know as well as I do that he is infinitely more right than she. It is her duty to listen to him on a question which concerns him as much as herself."

"I repeat that I will neither tell her myself, nor consent to your telling her."

"Well, my dear friend, you cut the ground away from under me. I am bound to respect your opposition. I will write to Hohenwalden and will inform him of it."

When Madame d'Héristal and M. de Morvan heard that Conrad was in London, waiting to come down, they expressed the opinion that he ought to be allowed to do so. They considered that if Claire could be persuaded to give way, the gain would be so enormous that it would be well worth while to run the risk of exciting her in order to obtain it. They did not think it was a certainty that she would refuse to see him. After much conversation, they ended by siding altogether with Madame

de Rochedure, and by recommending that Claire should be made aware of his presence in London.

Still Harriet Brandon continued to resist. She maintained that no good result could be produced.

Madame de Rochedure had to promise to say nothing.

She meant, honestly, to keep the promise; but when, next day, she found herself alone in the garden with Claire, she could not refrain from saying to her, quite innocently and with the intention of going no further, "Your aunt has given me details about your state of mind, and I learn, with infinite sorrow, that you persist in regarding marriage as an impossibility."

"Yes," sighed Claire, "impossibility is the word to use."

"You are absolutely alone in that conviction, Claire. Every friend you have is of the contrary opinion."

"I know that; but it is not a case for argument. I long with my whole soul to be Conrad's wife, and I should despise myself if I became so. It is no fault of mine that I am unworthy to bear his name; but it would

be a burning shame to me if, knowing my unworthiness, I did accept his name. My self-respect will not let me stoop to that."

"But, does it not make you hesitate to observe that no one else shares that view? Does it not influence you to see that we all—Conrad at the head of us—persist in thinking that you are wrong?"

"No, it does not make me hesitate; no, it does not influence me. It is a matter of personal appreciation. If anything could change me, I should, assuredly, be instigated by the frightful suffering I endure; but even that does not touch my resolve. I should cover myself with ineffaceable disgrace if I gave way. I am not responsible for my present position. But I should indeed be responsible if I accepted the position of Conrad's wife."

"Then you attach no importance to the fact that Conrad is suffering as much as you are?" asked Madame de Rochedure, watching keenly the effect of the question.

"Poor Conrad!" was the only answer.

"Now, Claire, be simple and natural," broke out Madame de Rochedure. "Come down

from your pedestal. Be a woman, not a saint. Let Conrad come to you. Listen to his . . ."

Claire turned and stared.

"Let Conrad come to me?" she said. "Listen to Conrad? What do you mean, Jeanne?"

"I mean," cried Madame de Rochedure, unable to preserve the prudence and the patience she had been endeavouring to impose upon herself, and bursting into her habitual outspokenness and indiscretion—"I mean that you are Count Hohenwalden's promised wife; I mean that he claims you as his wife; I mean that he insists on his right to defend his cause before you; I mean that he has come to England for the purpose; I mean that you will be both wicked and absurd if you refuse to see him. That is what I mean, Claire."

"Conrad is in England," repeated Claire dreamily, as if she did not comprehend.

"Yes, Conrad is in London, waiting for a telegram from me to come to Hurley."

Then Claire understood.

Her voice rose almost to a shout, as she cried out, "Never . . . never . . . will I consent to meet him! I will not be weakened."

"Well, Claire, I assert not only that you ought to see him, but that you ought to marry him."

"I will not discuss with you," exclaimed Claire, pale and trembling. "No one can guide me to my duty. I see it myself, and I will discharge it. I love Conrad in torture, as I loved him in delight. But I will not marry him."

"If it pleases you to accept torture for yourself, you have no right to impose it on Conrad."

"His suffering doubles my own. Say no more to me, I entreat you. He must go back at once. I will not . . . will not . . . see him."

She turned abruptly and hurried towards the house.

Madame de Rochedure, vexed and disappointed, had to acknowledge to the others that she had been unable to keep her pledge, that she had told all to Claire, and that Claire would not hear her.

As soon as Harriet Brandon learned what had happened, she hastened to join Claire.

She found her standing at a window, look-

ing fixedly at the sky. She put her arm round her, but did not speak.

After a while Claire said, "Tatte, he is in London. My soul burns to see him. But I must not. It would be an agony to us both to meet again, for nothing, and then—to part again. We must do our duty."

"Darling, my darling child, is it really impossible that you can decide to become his wife?"

Claire looked at her aunt. She answered, with astonishment, "You too? You, who know me; you, who have seen me grow, and have helped to make me what I am; *you* think I can change? Ah, Tatte, I did not expect that from you."

"My sole longing is to see you suffer less, my darling; and in that longing I am unable, often, to persist in believing that you are wise to refuse to marry. My feelings change many times a-day. Sometimes I think that you are right, sometimes that you are wrong. Jeanne de Rochedure promised me positively that she would not tell you Conrad is in London. I am extremely angry with her for breaking her word. But, now that the harm is done, now

that you know he is near you, I cannot help asking you, once more, if you will not yield."

Claire looked again at the sky; her face was profoundly gloomy, but it showed no hesitation.

"Dear aunt," she said, "once already I have had to ask you to support me—not to enfeeble me. Must I ask again?"

"Oh, dearest, dearest!" cried Harriet Brandon, cruelly distressed by this appeal, which sounded like a reproach; "what can I say to you? I do long for you to possess peace; but I am powerless to perceive in what direction it lies. I turn my eyes despairingly towards Conrad, and then away from him, and then back to him again; and that is why it happens that, at moments, I fancy you would be less wretched if you were his wife."

"Once more I tell you I cannot be his wife," said Claire, in a determined voice.

After a pause she added, "Jeanne must not speak to me again about it. Will you tell her so? Conrad knows my decision. My heart pants for him; but I refuse. He should not have come to England. He must go away at once."

When Harriet Brandon rejoined Madame de Rochedure, she said to her, "Of course Claire will not see him. You have brought him over; you must send him away again. Poor fellow! And poor Claire! There is nothing to be done. Claire insists that you shall not mention the subject to her again. Never will she consent to marry him."

"Well, all I can say is, that Claire's much-boasted will leads her to nothing but folly. She has had the extraordinary luck to stumble on to a good husband—at least I imagine he is good—and, with the perversest stupidity, for the sake of a fantastic fancy which she pretends to dignify by the name of duty, she breaks off with him, and then orders us all to remain respectfully silent. What on earth am I to say to Hohenwalden? At this moment he is groaning for a telegram."

"Why did you bring him over?"

"Because he wanted to come."

"That reason is absurd."

"Not so absurd as Claire's refusal to marry him."

"Claire has a motive for refusing; but Conrad has no motive for coming."

"No motive? He wants her to be his wife."

"My dear Marquise, I entreat you to give up the mission you have undertaken. It is idle to persist in it. I am deeply grieved for Conrad, but . . ."

"But . . . Claire is out of her mind. That is what you were going to say, I suppose? She makes me hate the very name of duty. And yet I am so fond of her that—though I am most indignant with her—I must let her have her own way."

"That is the wisest thing you can do."

"Which means that I must travel back to London and tell that unfortunate fellow to go home again. It would be cruel to simply write to him. I have not the courage to be so selfish as that. I will take the trouble to talk it out with him, and it will not be amusing at all. When will there be a train?"

An hour afterwards Madame de Rochedure had started. She promised to come back next day.

CHAPTER XXV.

"I HAVE utterly failed," said Madame de Rochedure, excitedly, when she saw Conrad Hohenwalden. "She refuses to see you."

"I expected it," he answered, almost gently.

"You expected it? You take it quietly?" exclaimed the Marquise. "What odiously self-sacrificing, law-abiding people you two are! I have come back, all this way, on purpose to comfort you; and, behold, you need no comforting! It is abominable to look on at such placid obedience. Have you no longing to rebel?"

"I should have rebelled a thousand times already, if rebellion would have served me," was the gloomy reply. "But it would only make the situation worse, for it would weaken Claire's confidence in me, and would show no respect for her on my part. If the future

brings us together—as, in my soul, I believe it will—we must meet, as we parted, without a doubt between us. In no way do I share the idea of duty which guides Claire; but I bow down before it because I cannot do otherwise."

"And I have undertaken this detestable journey up from Hurley simply to hear you say all that! Upon my word, I am sorry I came. I had better have contented myself with writing to you. A letter was all you merited. I see, more and more, how insane I am to be enthusiastic. But yet I persist! As you are so contented, I will simply drive back to the station and be off again, so as to get down to-night."

"Contented!" exclaimed Conrad.

"Yes, contented. Or, at all events, resigned; which, in substance, is the same condition, because it means acceptance. If you were not contented, you would be violent, would use strong words, and do foolish things—just as I should. Instead of that, you are as outrageously well-behaved as a model boy at a school. What is the use of assisting people who will not help themselves?"

"I am very grateful to you, I assure you.

But permit me to remind you that the idea of my coming to England was yours, not mine. I told you the attempt would lead to nothing —except more pain; but you urged me pressingly to make it. It is scarcely just to attack me for the failure of a scheme to which I lent myself, it is true, but which I told you I disapproved."

"But, Count, I wanted you to *act*, to *do* something. Go on doing. Go down to Hurley and walk into the house. Say you have come there for your wife, and that you will not leave without her."

"Yes; and be told by Claire that I have wantonly wounded and shocked her, and that I have forfeited her esteem. Thank you, Marquise, I will not try that. I know Claire's character too well. I need to retain her trust in me, not to destroy it by my own proceedings. I must think of the future as well as of the present. I do not deny that you tempt me frightfully; but you will never convince me."

"How I do abhor prudence!" cried Madame de Rochedure. "Never did it seem so hateful to me as at this moment. For God's sake, be

reckless! If you are not, I will do nothing more for you."

"I should deeply regret to lose your aid; but I cannot purchase it at the price you say you put on it. I will take no step which might create a difficulty between Claire and me. I will hope and I will wait. And above all, I will try to remain worthy of her. I will not ruin my cause by thrusting myself upon her. I am as human as you are, my dear Marquise; passion, excitement, vehemence, are natural to most of us—to me as much as to any other, I assure you—but the stake I am struggling to win is not to be gained by violence. I love; love is not usually a wise guide; yet, as you see, it teaches me self-command."

"It teaches you feebleness and poverty of spirit, you mean. It is useless to go on talking. Adieu. I shall go back at once."

"Permit me to escort you to the station, and be convinced of my deep gratitude. I shall leave to-night. May I ask you to let Claire know that my sole object is to respect her wishes, and that I have gone?"

"Hum, hum, hum," observed the Marquise, reflectingly. "I see with striking distinctness

that goodness and silliness are closely connected. However, it is your business, not mine."

"It was very kind of you to go up to him, Jeanne," said Claire next day, as the two sat together in the garden.

"Kind? It was simply stupid. You two are mad. It is useless to attempt to serve either of you. If he had been a man, as I understand a man, he would have come down here, in spite of you, and have carried you off, as a prize of war, in his strong arms."

"If he had been what you are pleased to call a man—of that sort—I should never have noticed him. A man who cannot do his duty is not a man."

"But, Claire, a man, a living man, should have the faults of a man. It is preposterous to be all qualities, like Hohenwalden. I can comprehend, by making a vast effort, that, here and there, a woman may be permitted to be utterly righteous—but a man! No, no; a man is not a man unless he can do wrong. If he is a seraph he is ridiculous."

"I leave you to your opinion."

"Perhaps you think that I, of all women,

ought to reverence virtue in a man; that I, who have failed so boundlessly in marriage, because of the unworthiness of my husband, ought to have a special admiration for male excellence. In a kind of a way I have that admiration; but it depends on the shape of the excellence. The qualities I need to see in a man are honour, truth, audacity, energy, integrity, fidelity. Nothing do I care for calculation, caution, resignation, sanctity; all that is maudlin; it is not masculine."

"I can only repeat that I leave you to your opinion. I do not argue with you."

"Of course you think you can overwhelm me by pointing to my own miserable condition, as evidence that I understand nothing about men."

"I assure you I do not think at all—except that Conrad has acted well, as becomes a man and a gentleman."

"Oh, if you distinguish between a man and a gentleman . . ."

"I do not distinguish in the least. On the contrary, I am unable to disassociate one from the other."

"Well, then, let me make the distinction

myself, if you will not. A gentleman may be permitted, sometimes, to be righteous; but a man ought never to merit such a designation."

"Again, and again, I leave you to your opinion."

"But, are you blind? Can you not see that I am saying all this, hotly, wildly, because of my own monstrous unhappiness? I attack your superlative Conrad out of pure jealousy of his transcendency, simply because it has been given to you to find a man who is all you think he ought to be. Oh, if my husband were even a small part of what I think he ought to be! And yet, you, you who have had the surpassing fortune to encounter your ideal of perfectness, you have the folly and the ingratitude to thrust it from you! What do you suppose, Claire, that other women say of your conduct?"

"I need my own approbation, not that of others."

"No—not even mine. How wonderful it is that I can be as fond of you as I am! There is absolutely no resemblance between us; I am all iniquity and you are all virtue; I own that; and yet I am dragged to you by a power I can neither resist nor define, by the

operation of the 'charm' the whole earth talks about, but which no inhabitant of the earth has yet succeeded in analysing. Men can take to pieces a gas that they cannot see, and can separate, and weigh, and catalogue its invisible component parts; but they are incompetent to dissect the most evident, the most delightful, the most resistless—although the rarest—of all the forces of a woman."

"You put what you call charm a very great deal too high," said Claire, wearily. "It is nothing more than an unconscious capacity of arousing sympathy."

"Shameful!" cried Madame de Rochedure. "Never was there such ingratitude to fate. Charm is the loftiest, the most unacquirable, the most sovereign of special gifts; it is the most admirable privilege of women, and you call it 'an unconscious capacity,' as if it were dreaming or letting your hair grow. It is true that it is 'unconscious,' and it is true that it is a 'capacity'; but of all our attainable unconsciousnesses, and of all our conceivable capacities, it is, milliards of leagues away, the most enviable."

"Perhaps. I do not care. It does not

interest me. I am not in a mood to discuss it. Here come the others. Go on about it with them."

And Claire wandered away, between the laurels, and thought, in gnawing grief, that Conrad had been near her, and that she had refused to see him.

"Well, what has she been saying to you?" asked Harriet Brandon, anxiously, as she came up. "And why has she gone away?"

"She has been saying that Hohenwalden behaves like a man and a gentleman in abstaining from coming down to her; and she has gone away to avoid talking about charm. There is nothing to be done with her."

"To avoid talking about charm? What do you mean?" asked Madame d'Héristal.

"I mean what I say—that I began to praise charm to her, and to tell her she has it; and she informed me she was not in a mood to argue about it."

"It would indeed be strange if she were in a mood to argue about anything," observed M. de Morvan. "I can conceive no subject whatever that she could possibly be disposed to discuss."

"Not even her own qualities?" exclaimed Madame de Rochedure, trying to laugh. "People are usually ready enough to converse about their own merits; but this quintessentially perfect Claire will not stoop to such an ordinary occupation! Yet it is true that she possesses charm, a species of charm proper to herself."

"Charm is always proper to the person who owns it," remarked Harriet Brandon.

"I am not of that opinion," put in M. de Morvan. "According to my experience, charm is too invariable in its manifestations, it proceeds too constantly by the same processes, for it to be possible to say of it that it is proper to anybody. There are many degrees of it, but every one of those degrees is included in one single species. Its extraordinary unity of operation is, indeed, one of the elements of its force. It has identically the same signification in every language; wherever it shows itself it produces the same results; it is the most thoroughly equivalent, the least local, of predominances; it is not peculiar to any class whatever, and, with the two exceptions of the Spaniards and the Southern Slavs

(whose women certainly possess it in somewhat larger quantities than can be found elsewhere), it is not special to any race or climate. Of course its extreme rarity does make of it, in one sense, a strictly individual possession; but notwithstanding that, it never can be, as Miss Brandon has just asserted, proper to the person who owns it, for the reason that every person who does own it, owns exactly the same intransmutable attribute. No one can modify its eternal nature; everybody must take it as fate has created it, and everybody must use it for the self-same universal end—all-conquering sway."

"You are talking of effect, not of cause," cried Madame de Rochedure.

"It is impossible to distinguish between the two. Directly charm begins to act upon us, we become powerless to think of the cause; we are so influenced by the effect that we can perceive nothing else."

"But we are not under its influence now; we are considering it, abstractly, as a power. What is it? Claire pretends that it is nothing more than an unconscious capacity of arousing sympathy."

"If Claire were still her former self, she would have given you a very different definition of it. As she is silent, let me try to speak for her. I am certain she and I think alike about it. First of all, charm is not a capacity; it is an endowment."

"And, pray, what is the difference between a capacity and an endowment?"

"A capacity may be acquired; an endowment must be inborn."

"But what is inborn may be modified by practice, and may assume, thereby, the characteristics of a capacity."

"That is true of many things, but not of charm. Charm can no more be developed by any act of its possessor than it can be lost. I have just said, and I repeat, that it is unchangeable, indelible. It is as unalterable as gold, as stable as the stars, as ineffaceable as history. Those who have it can neither divest themselves of it nor transform it. Even age does not affect its exercise; some of the most wondrous charmers I have known have been old women. And its astonishing immutability of shape and action is rendered all the more striking by its prodigious rarity.

It is so undiscoverably scarce that, after spending my life in searching eagerly for it in all the societies of Europe, I have finished by doubting whether a hundred specimens of its highest type are ever in existence on the whole Continent at the same time. In its noblest incarnations it is as exceptional as green roses. It is, of course, somewhat less unfrequent in its lower shapes; but even in its very feeblest degrees it is never abundant. Why, Frenchwomen themselves, with all their reputation, have very little of it. . . ."

"I have never been able," interrupted Madame d'Héristal, "to count up in Paris, during half a century, more than seven women of whom it could be said, with unhesitating certainty, that they had great charm."

"There is hardly any charm in Germany, and not much in Russia or Italy," went on M. de Morvan. "In England it is scarcely to be found—according to Continental ideas, I mean. Valona tells me he has not managed to discover more than three really grand examples of it during all the years he has passed here; he says that, with all the remarkable distinction that certain Englishwomen possess,

the glory of perfect charm is just as rare amongst them as it is elsewhere."

"That must be," suggested Madame de Rochedure, "because Englishwomen, notwithstanding the beauty of face and the aristocracy of type which are peculiar to the best of them, are usually so profoundly English in their ways and aspects, that they are not cosmopolitan enough to exercise charm over foreigners. The test of perfect charm is, that it works equally upon people of every race; that it knows no geographical limitations; that it affects all beholders alike, whatever be their nationalities or their prejudices. But, I ask you again, what is charm?"

"Charm is a caressing witchery, a magic of seduction, an enchanting spell, an almighty talisman!" exclaimed M. de Morvan, almost with enthusiasm. "It wins, it fascinates, it subjugates. It is all that remains to us of sorcery. It is, as its name implies, a song; but few indeed are the celestial voices that can chant it. It is the mystic force by which the few dominate the many, the weak overpower the strong. It is the least earthly of all the delicious attributes of women. It fills

us with admiration, homage, delight, and love. And it performs all this without an effort, by the simple showing of itself, without commands, without labour, almost without will. Its mere existence constitutes its might. All men bow down before it, in joy at being conquered by it. Charm is the revelation to humanity of the nature of supernatural attraction."

"You are quite out of breath, my dear Count," laughed Madame de Rochedure. "At your age you ought not to be so impassioned. I would not have asked you if I had thought the subject would excite you so violently. Really, it may fatigue you."

"He has got very near the truth," said Madame d'Héristal; "and as truth is almost as rare as charm, I will allow him to tire himself a little in discovering it. And now that we have done with that subject, tell us, please, what Claire said to you about Hohenwalden."

"I have told you already. She professes to rejoice that he did not come down, and she covers him with praise for his good behaviour."

"Which means," sighed Harriet Brandon, "that she will become more sad than ever, if that be possible."

And it seemed, as the days passed by, that she did really grow more sad.

One morning, in Lorston, Harriet Brandon met the doctor who had attended her when she was young. Notwithstanding his great age, he retained considerable activity of mind, and though he had given up practice, he continued to interest himself in his former patients. He had, of course, made acquaintance with Claire, and had looked at her with scrutiny. Like everybody else in Lorston and the country round, he knew her melancholy story. More, and better than anybody else, he had judged its effects upon her.

He said to Harriet Brandon, "I want to talk to you, if you will let me. I want to use the privilege of old age and old acquaintance, to speak frankly to you about your niece. She makes me anxious. Her case is very special. A violent moral shock, followed by typhoid fever, and that again by deep and enduring sadness, would shake any constitution. Not having been acquainted with her

before all this occurred, I am ignorant of her original powers of resistance; but, however great they may have been, they are now wearing out. She cannot go on indefinitely, under the weight she is carrying. I need no previous knowledge of her, and no present examination of her, to tell you that. It is enough to be aware of what she has to bear, and to look at her face. If that weight cannot be removed, or be, at all events, so lessened that it becomes sustainable, she will drift into another illness of another sort. And, my dear Miss Brandon, another illness, under such circumstances, would be very grave. I have the most profound sympathy for your niece—so has every one; and her admirable charity, since she came to Hurley, has added to the feelings with which she was already regarded; therefore you must not be angry with me for speaking to you in this way, and for telling you that something must be done, at once, to lead her thoughts into other channels."

"It is very good of you to express your opinion," said Harriet Brandon. "I am very grateful to you. I assure you I am. Yet, what can we do? I am always talking of this

with the friends who are staying with us. But we can invent no solution. Claire has seen and done so many things, that it is almost impossible to discover a fresh occupation for her. Her life at Hurley, and the work she has created for herself, are newer to her than any change of scene could be; and yet they have produced no effect at all upon her. On the contrary, she is certainly more broken now than when she arrived here. The blow which has struck her has been so tremendous, and the details are so extraordinarily cruel, that her position is not only utterly destructive, but utterly hopeless as well. We can look forward to nothing—to absolutely nothing."

"That may be your opinion," replied the old doctor, "but the examples are really very rare in which, to use your words, there is 'absolutely nothing' to be done. The first duty of those who tend the sick—the sick in mind as well as in body—is to invent the means of lessening their sufferings. You have, on your side, one assistant of great might — money; you have not to contend against the obstacle of poverty, which bars the road in so many cases of this kind. Take

your niece away. The experiment of Hurley has failed; it has produced no effect upon her. I tell you, something *must* be done for her. It is for you to determine what you will do; only do something. She must not be left here to brood over her sorrow."

"She will brood over it wherever she may be," answered Harriet Brandon, gloomily. "Neither change of place nor variety of labour will drive it out of her. I do not believe that time will cure her. Her character is exceptional—excessive, even. Earnestness has become a fault in her. I see that now—now that it is too late. The strange teaching she received, acting on her inborn faculties, had made of her a woman apart, unlike others. You cannot imagine what she was, doctor. Education had developed to intensity her original powers of sensation. It had fitted her for the highest and noblest uses. She had extracted from it a capacity of feeling, a force of will, a power of self-control, an ideal of right, which I believe to have been proper to herself alone. But I repeat, it made her excessive. With all her will and all her self-control, she was incapable of moderation. She

went too far in everything — provided she thought she was right. Now that ruin has come upon her, its effects are all the more frightful, and all the more irremediable, precisely because of this peculiar constitution of her spirit. And it is I, doctor, who have placed her in this position!—I—by hiding the truth from her till it was too late! Never can I forgive myself." And Harriet Brandon wrung her hands.

"Well, well, everybody makes mistakes sometimes," observed the doctor, trying to cheer her. "You acted for the best; we all know that. I have often talked about it with Cumber. Many women would have done exactly what you did. I do not think you ought to reproach yourself. Honestly, I do not. But that is not the question now. Take your niece away from Hurley. It does not suit her. Of that I am certain. Put her into another atmosphere. The air she breathes may help her."

On reaching home Harriet Brandon found that Claire was at the village. She profited by her absence to repeat to the others the conversation she had just had.

Madame de Rochedure was the first to speak. She said, "Take her away? Let us try. But it will be useless. Suppose we all go round the world together. Savages and sharks might produce a new effect upon her."

"Would she consent to leave?" asked Madame d'Héristal. "I doubt whether she would quit her work. She thinks she has a mission here."

"First of all," said Harriet Brandon, "let us decide among ourselves whether or not we ought to make the attempt with her."

"If she did consent," remarked M. de Morvan, "I should incline to Madame de Rochedure's idea. Take her away altogether; not, perhaps, round the world; but to another continent."

"Another continent is a long way off," said Madame d'Héristal. "What would you think of Norway, or Holland, or Russia? They are nearer, and they would be new countries to Claire."

"The choice of a direction is, for the moment, a secondary consideration," repeated Harriet Brandon. "The question is, shall we really propose to her to go at all? And will

she go, if we do propose it to her? Those are the first points."

"Talk to her about it and see," said the others.

So, when Claire came back, her aunt followed her to her room, and told her they were all of opinion that, as she had been eight months at Hurley, it might be wise to travel for a while, in order to get change of air.

Claire answered, with indifference, "As you like, Tatte. Things here can go on without me. I am not wanted . . . here . . . or anywhere. If you wish to move about, I will go with you. Here or elsewhere. . . . What does it matter?"

"Darling, darling, do not despair," murmured Harriet Brandon, putting her arms round Claire. "Hope still. Hope still."

"Hope? . . . Hope? . . . No; hope is now more impossible than ever—for a new reason. I have not told you yet—but I will tell you now—that for some time past I have been gradually losing the power of prayer. I have struggled, but in vain. I have prostrated myself before the altar, and have supplicated that prayer may be given back to me. But it has

not come. It seems to me that God no longer holds me by the hand. Oh, Tatte, it is so awful to be incapable of praying! It produces in me a loneliness that stupefies me. My soul is vacant and my lips are mute. Even in the woods, the faith-giving, grace-inspiring woods, where once I prayed with such delight—I hear no voice now, I feel no thanksgiving now. Nature used to be my tender friend, my enrapturing allurer, my sweet, bright guide to God. Nature looked on and clapped her hands with joy when Conrad said he loved me. But, now, even she has abandoned me. The leaves and grass, the winds and clouds, sang worship with me. But, now, they and I are silent together. I cannot pray. Try to imagine what that means, Tatte. Oh yes; we will go away . . . if you wish it."

Then Claire went down into the garden, and sat alone, and looked at the flowers, and wondered, wearily, whether they feel sorrow when they fade.

Harriet Brandon reported to her friends that Claire consented, with indifference, to travel for a while; and added, that she thought it would be prudent to get her away while she

was in the mood, lest, in her unsettling sadness, she should change her mind.

"You need not fear that," remarked Madame d'Héristal. "Poor Claire has no mind to change. What is left to her is not a mind; it is a mere implement of suffering. 'The eternal melancholy of thought,' as Chateaubriand called it, has got hold of her, and will not be driven out. I am beginning to acquire it myself, from looking at her. Only, in my case, it will not last."

"Well, when will you go?" asked Madame de Rochedure.

"I will propose to Claire," answered Harriet Brandon, "to embark at Hull for the North Cape. That would be really new to her."

But when, next day, a visit to the coast of Norway was suggested to Claire, she refused at once, on the ground that she could not bear to meet people; that gathering with other passengers on board a steamer would be intolerable to her; and that, if she went away at all, it must be to solitude.

"Try the coast of Holland then," suggested Madame de Rochedure to Harriet Brandon when she brought this answer. "In those

sand-hills there must be hamlets of three cabins each, inhabited exclusively by sea-gulls and abdicated mariners. When solitude is wanted, my thoughts turn instinctively to sand."

"Yes; the seclusion would be complete there, I daresay," observed M. de Morvan. "But where would they sleep? and what would they eat? What they want is a supportable inn, and no inhabitants in the neighbourhood. They will not discover the two together in any corner of the globe."

"Corner of the globe!" echoed Madame de Rochedure, springing to her feet—her expressive face illuminated by a new idea. "I have it! There is positively a corner where they can eat and sleep, and yet see nobody. I have been there myself!"

"And where may be this wonderful retreat?" inquired Madame d'Héristal, suspiciously.

"This wonderful retreat," answered Madame de Rochedure, in a tone of triumph, "is the most abandoned waste of dreariness on earth. In comparison with it, the deserts of Gobi, Libya, and the Sahara; the sands of Arabia;

the treeless region of Arctic America; the Patagonian steppe,—are horticultural exhibitions, are populous, joyous, frivolous abodes, are districts of massed crowds and insane delights. That is the place for Claire!"

"But where is it?" insisted everybody.

"Well, I will be generous enough to tell you. It is the Calvados shore."

"Why, it is in France!" exclaimed Madame d'Héristal, scornfully. "It is Trouville and Deauville! You call that solitude? You are distinctly mad, my dear Marquise. How frightfully you exaggerate!"

"I am not mad at all; it is not Trouville and Deauville, and I do not exaggerate. The Calvados shore begins at Trouville, that is true, but it finishes near Carentan, which is sixty miles away; and between the two ends lies my desert. I tell you there are little villages on that shore, where the emptiness is so intense that the very daylight is obliged to look about for an occupation in order to avoid being bored. When I was a child I was taken there. You see I remember it gratefully. In August, some mournful people go (as I did) to be bathed there, and for that reason there

are inns. But now, in June, there will not be one hapless soul on the entire beach. It is all sand and sparse stunted wire-grass, with sickly clover-fields behind, without a tree; some slate-grey cottages, and perhaps a fisherman's unhappy wife. If Claire goes there she will be alone, I assure you—utterly, absolutely alone; alone on the dreary sands; alone to gaze at the dreary sea; alone to seek vainly for shadow from the dreary sun, or for shelter from the dreary wind. The forlornness of that shore in early summer surpasses the known or unknown. An abandoned balloon is not more lost; the last survivor of a shipwrecked crew is not more desolate; fallen leaves are not more cut off from life. And yet there are inns. It is the very place for Claire."

"Your description would scarcely tempt ordinary people," said Madame d'Héristal, laughing. "But, as Claire's wants are so special, this disinherited shore may, as you argue, be precisely what she desires. I should have preferred the north of Europe, as being newer to her. But after all, I suspect that, as she says herself, 'it does not matter.'"

"And my wilderness has the additional advantage of being easily accessible," went on Madame de Rochedure. "There are boats, you know, from Southampton to Cherbourg. So Claire can avoid the journey, which would be odious to her, by London and Paris."

When this new scheme was communicated to Claire, she accepted it at once. She asked Madame de Rochedure for some details, and seemed to listen, with a sort of satisfaction, to her fantastic description of exclusion from the world.

She whispered to her aunt, "If it is, in truth, like that, I may perhaps win back, before the sea, the faculty of prayer. It seems to me that such loneliness might restore it to me. Oh, Tatte, if only I could pray again, I think I should be less miserable."

The journey was fixed for the following week.

The parting with the friends was sad; but it was agreed that they should meet, somewhere, in August or September.

CHAPTER XXVI.

On reaching the Calvados shore, they recognised, at once, that Madame de Rochedure's descriptions, overcoloured as they had seemed, possessed a general character of truth.

The loneliness, the absence of all life, were such that they would have been unbearable to any ordinary persons. It seemed to them incomprehensible that France could produce men and women who, in health of body and mind, could freely elect to stay in such a desert. For themselves it was exactly what they wanted; but they were not ordinary persons; they needed a special solitude which no one else could be supposed either to desire or to be able to support.

There was great difficulty in discovering decent lodging. They drove from Carentan (to which point they took train from Cher-

bourg), in the belief that they would find a resting-place in some village as soon as they got on to the sea-beach. But they had to travel for hours, as far on as Langrune, before they could decide to risk the beds and cookery that were offered to them.

Excepting half-a-dozen children sent out from Caen to bathe, no one was there.

"I think, dear Claire," said Harriet Brandon, trying to smile, "that you will not find the crowd unpleasant. Even vacuum is not so empty as this."

The solitude seemed to them to possess a character peculiar to itself. It was a purely local product, proper to that coast; it was inherent, independent of all cause, spontaneous, self-existent. It was as impossible to conceive that solitude without Langrune, as to imagine Langrune without the solitude. The two were one, of the same essence, born of each other.

Claire went out upon the sand. No green was to be seen, no tree, no plant. It was all sand, everywhere. The gulls were the only living things. She saw the distant reef of low brown rocks, uncovered by the tide. She

looked at the grey-blue sky. She felt that the air was light and good.

After a while she murmured to herself, "My aunt has brought me here for change. Change! Alas! there is no change for sickened hearts!"

Then she turned away and strolled to the old church.

At the door she stopped and said, "I have once more reached a land where there are open churches everywhere. I will see what they can do for me. Perhaps, in one of them, I may win back prayer."

She entered, knelt, pressed her hands upon her eyes, and tried, with all her might, to shape a supplication.

For many minutes she prolonged the effort, but in vain.

Mournfully, she came back to the shore, sat down, took up sand and tossed it mechanically, without knowing what she did, into the air. As there was no wind, it dropped again, quite straight, upon her knees.

"That is but natural," she thought. "The sand is like my prayers. It falls back on to me—as they do."

She gazed wistfully at the far-off sea, and, all at once, the impression of remoteness brought into her a clear memory of her own history. She knew it was her own, and yet it seemed to her to be some one else's. Dreamily, she reviewed her conduct and her fate, as if they were those of another person.

"Destiny was strangely harsh to her," she muttered. "She did not deserve such punishment as that. And how could she resist her love? Could she have really loved him, as she said she did, if she drove him away from her like that? Yet, what else could she do? She could not marry him. Oh no. And he? Did he go on loving her as she loved him? How could such a situation end? Did they both die of pain?"

And then she was conscious it was herself, and not a stranger, that she was judging.

She went on: "It was useless to come here for this. I knew all this at Hurley. Yet I do feel a change here—and it is a change for the worse. I am weaker — weaker in will. My resolution is diminishing. I am sure of it. Not that I will be his wife. No, never will I yield. It is not that. But I suspect,

more and more—particularly at this moment —that I may break under the strain. And then, what would my poor aunt do? She would die too. I must fight on, if I can, for her, as for myself. If it did not seem cowardly and silly, I would propose to her to go back at once. The influence of this place is bad for me. I see that already."

Throughout the following week she made great efforts to be calm. She repeated frequently to her aunt that her preoccupation was to bring her mind into concord with the languid torpor of her surroundings. Sometimes she fancied she was succeeding. She passed the hours almost entirely in the church or on the shore, in passive abstraction, in misty know-nothingness. It seemed to her, at certain moments, that she was becoming able to exist without feeling.

But by degrees she perceived that this impression was deceptive, and that, in reality, she was drifting out of her own control.

The absence of fixed occupation was a damaging cause which she had not taken into account. She had imagined that in loneliness and stillness she would find a succouring

atmosphere in harmony with her own state; and that—though there could be no change in the nature of her pain—that harmony might conduct her, insensibly, to the inert submission which she had grown to regard as the utmost good she could attain.

As time passed on, however, she became conscious that lifeless stagnation was as far beyond her reach as reasoned peace and resignation were. She found that her nature could no more acquiesce in deadness than her heart could lend itself to forgetfulness.

Her former trust in will and duty had almost dropped away from her. Neither will nor duty continued, actively, to help her. She was absolutely certain that she could persist in duty, in the abstract. But the sweet theory of duty that once had seemed to her so plain, so natural, so strengthening, was gone, and it was with pangs of humiliating deception that she recognised its disappearance. She had ceased to regard pure duty as a faithful friend and true ally, and had come to see in it nothing more than a tyrannical master whose imperious voice she would continue to obey, but for whom she had

no affection left. It seemed to her that the loss of her confidence in will, and of her enthusiasm for duty, was the worst symptom in her case. It made her feel utterly alone in the fight. No auxiliary was left to her. No defensive weapon remained in her tired grasp excepting heavy dull obedience.

She felt each day that she was weakening.

Instinctively she made efforts, last efforts, efforts that grew fainter, to seize herself and to stand up steadily.

With perpetually increasing prostration, with vague consciousness that danger was approaching her, she struggled on—and feared.

The loneliness in which she had placed trust had cheated her. Dimly she commenced to know that it was, in truth, an agent of destruction for her.

She fancied more and more each hour that great illness was coming on her. She could foresee no other issue to her state.

But she measured herself wrongly. The influences at work upon her did not take that form. She expected they would strike her where she felt herself the weakest. They

attacked her, on the contrary, where she believed herself to be the strongest.

It was not her body that broke down; it was her heart.

In a moment, as she sat before the sea, the long combat ended.

Reaction darted into her.

Her hesitations took a form at last.

There was within her a fierce outbreak.

Her feebleness turned into tumult, her exhaustion into wildness, her deadness into life.

A headlong rush tore over her, of vainly held down, outbursting love.

Honestly, bravely, had she fought against herself; unshakenly had she driven off assailing memories, uprising yearnings, enfeebling sweetnesses of wish.

Suddenly she was vanquished.

In one second the patient work of long months of struggle was blown away by a fierce gust of passion.

She fell before its force.

She could hold her love at bay no longer.

Alone on the dreary shore, alone with the sun and the birds, she cast herself upon the sand, and rolled in anguish, and sobbed con-

vulsively, and murmured to the unhearing wind, "Conrad . . . Conrad . . . oh, my Conrad . . . come to me!"

Resisted love had its own way at last. The protracted contest had only served to give to it a new mightiness. It leaped into her as a victorious army breaks into a long-besieged fortress, infuriated, all-destroying, wildly shouting triumph. It was not the intense tenderness of the early days of fondness that swelled again within her; it was a new, raging, burning passion that shivered her with the fury of its explosion, a storm-torrent of overwhelming love that swept her, broken, before its flood.

In its devouring force she felt herself whirled round and suffocated. It seemed to her that, instinctively, for an instant, she tried to strive, and then, that all was over, and that she was drowned in a vast foaming sea of love.

Trembling, she seized her head with both her hands, and shut her eyes with all her strength, and rocked herself, and poured out fevered words, and fancied, almost with relief, that the fierce fulness of her heart would tear her body into pieces.

With a wailing, half-unconscious cry, she groaned, "Conrad . . . Conrad . . . come to me! Conrad . . . Conrad . . . I love you!"

And then she was aware that her pain was infinitely greater than it had ever been before.

She felt that love trampled on her, that she was its prey.

Its inrush beat her down and lacerated her.

She asked herself indistinctly, "But why is love so bitter now? It was all joy once. It has become cruel suffering. Why?"

Yet notwithstanding the strange anguish she felt, the intensity of her emotion brought back to her the sentiment of life.

She held her head tighter and tighter. She could not think. She had no ideas whatever. But she had two violently marked sensations; —she loved with passion, and she ached with pain. She knew nothing else.

For minutes she remained half-stupefied, and yet with an intuitive perception that vitality was stronger in her than it had been before.

Confusedly she comprehended that pain is the completest form which the consciousness of existence can assume.

Then arose the need of action.

Suddenly she threw back her head and cried, "I will write to him."

This brought her to realities. She had a return of will. Something was before her—something to be done.

"Yes," she repeated, "I will write to him . . . at once. I can resist no longer. This is destiny."

The faculty of reasoning came into her once more. But it was useless as a guide, for it was at the mercy of all-dominating love.

With fixed eyes she gazed across the waves, and saw two gulls skimming slowly side by side. Plaintively she murmured, "Two together! Two together! We can never be together!"

With an effort she stood up. She felt as if she had received a stunning blow. Her head was giddy. Her heart beat fitfully.

Slowly she went homewards, with uncertain steps, feeling, mistily, that her love was more cruel and immense. It seemed, in her bewilderment, that it was vaster than the ocean and the earth, more mighty than all force, more pitiless than hate.

Her aunt, who, though she respected her desire to be alone, did her utmost to keep watch upon her from afar, came out to meet her, and saw at once, with fear, from her expression, that something had occurred. Before she could put a question to her, Claire cried, hurriedly, "I can bear it no longer. I must write to him at once. I cannot go on resisting. My heart is bursting. I will not be his wife. No, aunt, I will never be his wife. But I will write to him and tell him how I love him. Oh, I will tell him how I love him . . . I love him to madness."

Her voice vibrated and shook with the intensity of her passion.

Harriet Brandon looked at her with alarm. It seemed, once more, as if her brain were giving way.

"But, darling, what has happened?" she asked, anxiously. "I thought you had decided to write no more."

"Oh yes, I had decided . . . of course I had decided. That was my pride! As if I could decide anything! Of course I meant it. I thought that what I called my will would hold. It has not held . . . that is all. It

has broken under pressure . . . like all impostures. Perhaps I shall become ashamed . . . but I have no shame yet. Aunt, I glory in my weakness . . . for weakness is love. Weakness has led me back to him. Will kept me away from him. Which is right? Oh, I love him . . . I love him! . . . I must write at once . . . at once."

She walked more and more quickly as they approached the hotel, exclaiming at each instant, "Yes—yes—I must write to him. At once . . . at once . . . at once."

She almost ran into her room, seized a pen, and, in fever, wrote—

"My heart rushes to you.

"I cannot hold it for another instant.

"Silence is ended.

"I must speak.

"I send you my soul, Conrad. Take it. Keep it. Cherish it.

"Until this day I have refused to read a letter from you—or to write to you.

"I can withstand my love no more.

"Do you remember, Conrad, that once in

my ignorance I asked you, 'Can we feel more than this?'

"Now I can answer my own question. To-day I am rooted up by love.

"I will not be your wife, Conrad. Never, never. But my heart thirsts for you.

"The glow within me burns me.

"It surpasses possibility.

"Write to me, Conrad. Write. Write. At once. Write long pages—pages without number, without end. Pour out your spirit to me. Speak to me of love—of love—of nothing but our love.

"My heart is wild.

"Far more than this is in me. But I cannot say it.

"What I write is only an infinitely small part of what I feel.

"My words are ice.

"My whole soul is on fire. No language can tell you of the flame.

"You know how I have resisted. I am beaten now. Beaten for ever.

"I am yours—yet not yours. Never will I be your wife.

"I will love you—and not see you;

"Love you—and never speak to you;

"Love you—and hold back my arms from you;

"Love you—and declare that you are not mine.

"But—oh how I love you!

"Conrad, I am raving. And yet I tell you nothing—nothing—of what is really in me.

"Write instantly.

"Write instantly—I say.—Your own, supremely, for ever, for ever, CLAIRE."

As soon as the letter was sent to the post, excitement lessened. The letter had been an outlet for it. Fatigue appeared. Claire was disabled by emotion.

A great prostration, physical and moral, came upon her. She became incapable of thought or movement. The tempest of storming love was hushed again, abruptly, by exhaustion.

In flickering, half-wandering reverie, she thought the contrary of all that she had thought before.

She told herself that, in coming back to

love, she had simply returned to the law of nature; that in repelling love, she had been striving after the unattainable, after an object which is, and ought to be, beyond the reach of woman; that the highest of earthly ends is to be, in all things, human; that she had not been human so long as she battled against her heart, and that she had become human by yielding to it.

Her previous idea of all-prevailing duty was, for the moment, gone.

"And yet," she murmured to herself, "yet, notwithstanding all this, I will not be his wife."

To that one remaining resistance she still clung instinctively.

It seemed to her that, if honour could be separated from duty, she would call all else duty, and that one decision, honour.

Her nervous debility was extreme. At times she could scarcely stand. Yet, shattered as she was, she told herself, each instant, that the letter was on its way, and she counted, excitedly, the days which must pass before the reply could reach her hand.

She spent those days in harassed lassitude. Sometimes she made efforts to go on writing

to Conrad; but she was too shattered, too weak, to be able to say anything that corresponded with her first fiery outpour; so, as she would not seem to change her tone, she wrote no more.

The expected day arrived.

But the answer did not come.

Claire waited in an impatience that was both wild and worn out. The strain unhinged her more and more. Renewed paroxysms of love flashed through her, but they were feverish and short, and were followed, instantly, by long attacks of feebleness and collapse. Sadness seized her with such intensity that it became, in itself, a malady.

Faintly she struggled on. She tried to write to Hurley and to give instructions about her work there. She had kept up, since her departure, a correspondence with the doctor and the schoolmistress, who were her special representatives, and received regular reports from them. But the immense emotion that had overpowered her had unfitted her for any effort.

Sometimes she exclaimed, "Am I myself? Can I be changed like this? I am no longer

a living creature. How is it possible that I can have ceased to be? Nothing is in me now except disorder. Am I going mad? And it was I—positively I—who had the folly to believe that will and duty would always give me strength."

Then thought disappeared again and all was blank around her.

At last came Conrad's letter. It had been delayed by his absence from Vienna.

Half blinded by agitation, brokenly, she read. She drank in his fond gratitude that, at last, she wrote and spoke again of love; his cries of eager hope; his passionately tender words; his imploring supplications that she would let him come to her at once, that she would yield and become his wife.

Yet, when she had finished the letter, she laid it down and closed her eyes, and murmured, "It makes me no happier."

It seemed to her, indeed, after she had gone through it many times, that it rendered her even more miserable than before.

For hours she was tossed about by doubt.

Sometimes she bitterly regretted that she had written. Sometimes she rejoiced that she had

done so. By degrees, however, she drifted to the almost permanent impression that she had done very wrong in ceasing to resist—even for a while. The temporary surrender had brought her no contentment. The fierce overflow of emotion had passed away. It seemed to her, even, that the arrival of Conrad's letter had driven all remnant of it out of her. And in its place arose a gradually forming sentiment of shame that she had given way. There were moments when she despised herself.

Decidedly, her condition had become worse than it was before.

She answered Conrad.

She spoke to him with deep fondness, but declared she would not consent to see him. She told him, in self-accusing words, that her abandonment of herself had not endured, that she had mastered it and had driven it out of her, that she was regaining possession of her will, that their previous silence towards each other must be renewed, and that she would write no more.

When this declaration was sent off, the problem of the future appeared to Claire to have become clearer.

She would set to work once more, not to conquer love—that was more than ever impossible—but to regulate its promptings, to win back self-control, to earn sufficient calm, to be fit to live and go on working. The rest would settle itself as it could.

But she soon found that this programme, modest and moderate as it looked when she formed it, was as irrealisable as any other, and that, in reality, she was utterly powerless, utterly objectless, utterly guideless. She became aware that the explosion of feeling through which she had just passed had not only wearied her completely, but also that it had led her to perceive the hopelessness of her position even more absolutely and more certainly than she had ever perceived it before.

From this sensation to despair the distance was not great. That distance was soon covered, and then she became conscious, with horror, that there were moments when the idea of death arose before her and tried to tempt her.

"And this," she said to herself, "this is what may become of a true heart when sorrow

enters it! I had a true heart once. I had. I am sure I had. And I have lost it. I have turned into a coward. I have been tried and have failed. I have even sunk so low that fancy has dared to suggest death to me as a refuge. My God, you know that I have not consented to that thought. You know that I have rejected it with all that remains to me of strength. But still, the idea has entered into me—in spite of me. Where am I to turn for aid? No prayer, no will, no duty, no hope! That is what I have come to! I who was Claire—the wilful, trustful, straightforward Claire!"

It seemed to her, one day, that the sand and the sea had ceased to be companions to her, and that trees would be more friendly and more helping. A great longing broke into her for leaves, and lanes, and flowers. Besides, people were beginning to arrive at Langrune, and she could not bear their presence.

In the condition of her mind, all sensations were acute, all decisions were abrupt. She told her aunt, instantly and excitedly, that she was tired of Langrune, and that she wanted to return home.

Harriet Brandon had determined, however, to keep her away as long as possible from Hurley, provided only there were no signs in her of approaching illness. Physically, she was better again. Her melancholy was intense; but she was fairly well—she walked without much fatigue—and, for the moment, there seemed to be no motive for hurrying her home.

So she answered, that as they were out there, it would be a pity to go back without seeing something of the country, which she knew was very pretty; that they might as well move on somewhere near, and that she would inquire about places.

Claire did not object. Her eyes longed suddenly for woods and fields and hedges, and provided she could see them at once, she cared little where she found them. Delay alone was what she could not bear. Her impatience had become extreme.

The master of the hotel named several quiet villages to Harriet Brandon. Almost all of them were inland, for the season had commenced along the shore, and crowds were gathering there. But to all the inland spots

there was the same objection; they possessed no inns. There was abundance of green woodland, but food and lodging were very rare.

At last, after going through the list and consulting maps and guide-books, they decided they would go to Honfleur, which was within a short day's drive, was lonely enough, and where the inns were said to be fairly good.

Next morning they started along the coast, through Cabourg, Beuzeval, Trouville; saw and shrank from, as they passed by each place, a noisy mob of excessively dressed people; and in the afternoon reached the Cheval Blanc at Honfleur.

The inn, the town, the country round, would have pleased Claire if anything could please her. There was a contented dulness, a rickety old-fashionedness, an antiquated queerness, in the streets and in the air; there was a mixture of harbour and woodland, of sailors and peasants, of fish and grass, of tanned sails and ripening corn, which almost interested her for an instant. There were too, in the air, heroic memories and traditions, and tales of ancient fights by land and sea. She had seen, as they drove in, the gardens, the brakes and

groves, the orchards, the tree-covered slopes, that stretch away behind Honfleur. She had looked across the wide estuary of the Seine, spotted with passing vessels, and had caught sight of the buildings of Havre, on the other side, six miles across. Her impression of these new surroundings was, that they might have gladdened her, if only she had not brought sadness with her; but, in her condition, the return to a semblance of a town, and especially the reappearance of verdure and flowers, only seemed to produce in her, if possible, an additional depression. At Langrune it had seemed to her that she needed to look again at vegetation. She found it in profusion at Honfleur, and it disheartened her still more. Vegetation means vitality, and Claire, who had no life left in her, found, with surprise and pain, that she recoiled instinctively from the work of life in nature, as being in contradiction with herself.

They went, after dinner, for a stroll behind the town. They both felt it was a winning land, and that if mere charm of view could refresh their weary hearts, it would be ungrateful of them not to be satisfied with what they saw.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Next day Claire went off alone, by shady ways, amidst the leafy greenness of the Norman landscape.

Slowly she wandered beside the tangled hedges, sweet with honeysuckle and dog-roses; past cottages half hidden under gnarled apple-trees; past straggling hamlets on the roadside, with thatched, lichen-covered roofs, hollyhocks and sun-flowers in the gardens, and peas and cabbages and beans.

In each hamlet was a grey old church. In each church she knelt, and tried to think and pray.

And so she sauntered on, purposeless, dreamy, very sad.

The change from sand to leaves refreshed her eyes, but did not cheer her spirit. It

supplied her with new evidence that she was beyond the reach of outside influences.

The chatter of the children, of whom she found many round the cottage doors, interested her for an instant; but when she left them and rambled on again, she saw, each time, that the soothing did not last.

She sat in the shadow of the fruit-laden boughs, and wistfully wondered at the meaning of things.

Unceasingly she asked herself, "Why is this?"

Fancies, memories, fears, the ever-wearing, exhausting consciousness of hopelessness, passed vaguely through her head. But to the constantly recurring, "Why?" she could provide no answer. Her fate was a mystery to her.

After some time had passed—she knew not how much—she rambled on again.

Under a tree a little girl was twisting up a wreath of corn-flowers. Claire stopped, looked, and asked, "Shall I help you?"

The child stared at her timidly, with suspicion, and held the flowers tighter, closer to her. But the kindness of Claire's face vanquished her mistrust, and with the quick mobility of childish impulse, she suddenly

held out the half-tied stalks and answered, "Yes—help me."

The agile fingers took the flowers, and in a minute the child was crowned with a blue diadem.

Proudly she inquired, "Is it pretty?"

"Very pretty, my child. Flowers are jewels for little children. Jewels, you know, are shiny stones that are fetched from distant countries; but they are not at all so beautiful as flowers."

"I should like to see a jewel," said the child.

"Look at the stars at night; they are all jewels."

"Are they? Then, are they stones?"

"Ah," sighed Claire to herself; "if my mind were capable of such simple logic as that, I might perhaps get an answer to my 'Why?' I lose my way in subtilties, but this child goes straight, like all who act in faith."

Then she answered, "No, stars are not stones."

"But you said that jewels are stones, and that stars are jewels."

"So I did. But the reason why stars and jewels are alike is, not that they are both stones, but that they both shine."

"I do not understand," muttered the child, puzzled.

"So, after all, like me, she has her 'Why?'" said Claire to herself. "Difficulties of comprehension are only in proportion to our ability to solve them. If this child knew more, she would recognise the difference between stars and stones. Probably, if I knew more, I should perceive the reason why I suffer."

As she strolled on, she began to ask herself whether knowledge would supply to her the calm which neither will, nor duty, nor resignation could procure for her.

But soon she told herself, "No—no; in such a case as mine, intellectual development would mean pride, self-confidence, self-esteem, the very contrary of the humbleness which alone befits the weary-hearted. The knowledge that the child needs is mere acquaintance with material facts; but the knowledge that I require, to help me in my distress, would be the science of the soul, the revelation of the laws of suffering, the learning that is not given to men, and which, if they had it, would only do them greater harm. No, my remedy is not in knowledge."

And then she added, "Nor in anything on earth."

But, strangely, she felt compelled to add, "Excepting truth."

She stopped and repeated, interrogatively, "Truth? Ah yes—yes—the truth about the marriage. Yes—that would save me. But that truth is as undiscoverable as the secret of life. Alas!"

Wearily she returned to Honfleur.

She told her aunt of her talk with the child.

"I seek everywhere," she said, "for a solution. You see I do—even under apple-trees and from children. But I do not learn. My anguish is not hushed. Tatte, it will destroy me. But I will struggle. Oh, if I could pray!"

Before a week had gone she knew the whole country round; she had walked on every road, and had followed almost every path.

To one of the villages, about two miles from Honfleur, she returned often. It was called Iries. It stood amidst oaks and apple-trees that cast ever-changing lights and shades. It had an air of prosperity and contentment

made up of little. Amidst the cottages and cabins stood three comfortable houses, whose red bricks and tiles had browned down with time. And there were gardens everywhere all gay with flowers. Creepers hid the walls. The air was fresh with sylvan sweetnesses. There was such a healthy growthfulness of plants that its vigour was almost too powerful for the gentle quiet of the place. It seemed to Claire that the bright hamlet held out its hand to her in kindness, and said to her, "Be calm."

In the centre was a green churchyard, all full of graves and grass; with a low ivy-covered wall around it, so that the village people could see the resting-places of their dead as they passed by. And in the churchyard stood a little ancient church, of worn faded stone, time-gnawed and crumbled, of many shades of grey, rusted, speckled, brindled with russets, duns, and sorrels. The inside was poor and bare; the walls were whitewashed; but yet, with all its nakedness, Claire fancied that the old church welcomed her. She took it as an object for her weary walks.

One day she met the Curé, in the porch,—

a grave, white-haired, back-bent old man, with a soft awkward manner and a weather-beaten face that told of great charity.

He said to her, timidly, "Few strangers come to Iries, mademoiselle. But you have been here four days running. The children have told me of the young lady who brings them *bonbons* and tells them such stories as they never heard before. And each time you have knelt in my poor church. May God guard you! May He listen favourably to your prayers!"

Tears rose to Claire's eyes as the old Curé spoke. He looked at her, she thought, with sympathy. His kind tone touched her; it upset her, even. In her confusion of spirit she felt unworthy of his goodwill.

She answered, with a hesitating voice, "Alas! Monsieur le Curé, the prayers I offer cannot be heard . . . because . . . because . . . I cannot pray at all. This church is silent . . . lonely . . . encouraging; . . . but, even here . . . even here . . . I cannot pray. God will not listen to me."

"My child," replied the old priest, earnestly—almost solemnly—"I must not let you express

doubt of the mercy of God. To whom should He show mercy, if it is not to those who suffer? You would not come here if you were not thrust on by faith. Faith, my child, cannot doubt. Faith means trust and hope; nay, more, it means confidence and certainty."

He spoke with such tenderness, yet with such authority, that Claire bowed down her head and murmured faintly, "I have a great sorrow . . . a sorrow that has weakened me. Monsieur le Curé . . . I have lost the power of prayer. Will you pray for me? I am very, very sad."

"Poor child, poor child," he said, looking at her with increasing interest. "The world is hard to some of us. I live, as you see, away from it; removed from all contact with it, from all knowledge of it; yet even here, even in this far-off village, which seems to be so distant from the fight of life, there is suffering; even here there is space—and there is occasion—for trial and distress. You ask me to pray for you. Indeed I will, with all my heart. But first of all, my child, come with me to the altar-steps. I am ignorant what your sorrow is; but its reality is written on

your face; I need not know its nature to be certain that you suffer. Come. Let us kneel together. And then you shall carry away my blessing."

Claire followed him.

Intensely, once more, she forced herself to pray.

But soon she rose, despairingly.

"I cannot; I cannot," she cried. "I will come again—if you will let me."

"If I will let you?" replied the Curé. "The house of God calls out to you to enter. It offers you the peace you seek. Do not ask leave from me. You pain me. Indeed I will pray for you. But come, come here often, and pray for yourself. Prayer will return to you. I promise you it will. The power of prayer can never be lost by those who are determined to possess it."

Next day, and the next, she came again.

The children waited for her eagerly, at the entrance to the village, and ran to her when they saw her coming, and clustered round her, and cried to her for sugar-plums and tales. And Claire sat with them on a fallen tree, and learnt their names, and grew to be their friend.

The grandfather of one of them was dying. As soon as Claire heard this, she went to him, and talked with him, and tended him, and next day brought him little comforts from the town.

The Curé met her at the bedside, and noticed the quickness and the lightness of her touch. He said to her, "I think you must have been in sick-rooms already. In helping others you will help yourself."

Then they walked together to the church. On the way he looked at her inquiringly, and watched her, and tried to comfort her with wise words.

But Claire grew more sad each hour.

She had told her aunt about the good old priest at Iries, and had asked her to come up some day to see him, and to make acquaintance with the children. But though she talked of this, and sometimes of other little plans as well, she knew, within herself, that she was breaking down. She knew that there were moments when her head was gone; not only empty, but utterly gone, as before the fever.

She thought unceasingly of Conrad, of the strangely cruel nature of their separation, of the joy that might have been—but was not. All violence had passed from her. The fierce attack that had burst upon her at Langrune had left a heavier and intenser weariness than she had known before; but no new sensation had resulted from it. She felt herself condemned, and Conrad with her.

Harriet Brandon perceived all this. She said nothing to Claire, but her anxiety grew more biting each week. The experiment of leaving Hurley, and of seeking other atmospheres, had failed totally and hopelessly. Nothing was left to try. All attempts were exhausted. Claire seemed to be drifting straight once more to grave illness.

Would it not be wise to go back to Hurley? Claire spoke herself, vaguely, of return to England, saying, sometimes, that she was wanted there; that things were not progressing well; that there were jealousies to smooth down, and obstacles to remove, and that her work was going badly in her absence.

One morning a letter came from the school-

mistress, confessing that she had quarrelled with the doctor.

Claire thought that the right way to answer was to go home at once. But, in her lassitude, she had lost the power of prompt decision about things that did not touch her heart. So she put the letter into her pocket, to be considered later on.

Then she strolled out to the harbour, and tried to feel an interest in vessels and cordage. But after a while she turned her back upon the water, and sauntered up amongst the trees, and found that she was on the way to Iries. She went there without a purpose, simply because she had formed the habit of going. There was an attraction to her in the place that she could not define; it was dim, unoutlined, like her own emotions. In the brokenness of her spirit the old grey church had become to her a resting-place. She breathed in it an atmosphere that, to her imagination, was full of prayer; it seemed to her, indeed, that, before that altar, the air was praying for her.

It had become a solace to her to see the laughing children trooping round her when she reached the village, and, especially, to

meet the Curé, and to listen to his words of kindness. She felt less alone when he had spoken to her.

So that morning she wandered once more along the lanes, half unconscious, laden with gloom, incapable of thinking, but with a shadowy perception that it was a privilege not to think and to be able to find a refuge in lethargy. Peasants passed, and said "Good day"; but she did not heed them. Flowers blossomed in the hedges; but she did not see them. Birds sang, rejoicingly, in the branches; but she had no ear for them. The sun shone brightly on her as she slowly walked; but she did not feel it. In the crushing of her life she often lost the sentiment of realities, and that morning she had no clear sense of what was happening round her. Nothing was distinct to her except the instinct of dull suffering.

Children waited for her on the path, and ran to greet her; but she had no smiles for them. They questioned her, but obtained no answers. So, as she would neither laugh nor talk, they left her, with the habitual ingratitude of children. A child is a charming com-

panion in happiness, but is seldom a faithful friend in sorrow.

And then she was aware that she had reached the village and was amidst the gardens. But though she knew that she was there, the place seemed strange to her. Her eyes were powerless to see.

A little girl, as she passed by, held out a rose to her.

She took it, did not recognise that it was a flower, and let it drop.

The girl looked at her, and was astonished and offended.

In that way, half unknowingly, she reached the churchyard wall, pushed open the gate, passed slowly, with a weary sigh, between the graves, and entered the church.

No one was there.

The stillness seemed to bring a solace to her, but it was not a solace that cheered. The silence soothed her only because it was in harmony with her own condition. In her vague gratitude to it for sympathising with her, she felt that it would be irreverent to break it by her footfall, and knelt, at once, on the floor, inside the porch.

Then began again the vain attempt to pray; the struggle between the longing to supplicate for peace and the hopeless inability to frame a thought. Ideas she had not. Words would not come. With lowered head and clasped hands, with tears trickling down her cheeks and dropping leadenly on to the stones, she knelt in torpid despair, in the exhaustion of utter hopelessness.

Suddenly the sun broke in at a side window; a ray of brightness fell straight upon her face. At the same instant the sound of approaching steps reached her ear from the outside. In order not to bar the way, she rose, and was moving into the church, when she became aware that the new-comer was the Curé.

She went to meet him.

He greeted her, as usual, with the words, "May God guard you, my child!" Then he asked whether she was calmer.

"Alas, no!" was all that she could answer.

A rush of tears added testimony to the words.

The Curé took her hand and led her into the sunlit air.

"Look," he said, "my child, at the graves spread out before you. Each one of them has its own tale of suffering; for each of them contains an ended life, and life is nought but suffering. The few who enjoy while here—or rather, who seem to us to enjoy—are objects of envy, and even of ill-will, to nearly all the others; for poor human nature, in its revolt against distress, is jealous of inequalities, and calls, democratically, for universal fraternity in pain. That, at least, is my experience; and I lay it before you, not as comfort (there is none in it), but as the law. You, my child, do not appear to be amongst the few who do not suffer; your lot seems to be cast amongst the many who know true sorrow. Your share of trial is, perhaps, a large one. I do not judge it. But remember that, in the weariness of our earthly career, the true birthright is to be with the many, not with the few; with the sad, not with the gay. Exceptions imply special responsibilities. And there are, indeed, responsibilities enough, for all of us, without adding to them by the pretension that we ought not to suffer. And who knows that your trial—whatever be its nature—may not be near

its end? I have seen, in my long contact with souls, innumerable examples of the mercy with which we are treated. I have seen gladness follow upon affliction, light spring out of darkness, peace begotten of anguish, and all for no apparent reason — simply because God has willed it so. May you, my poor child, be the object, some day, of His pity! Meanwhile, remember that it is a privilege to suffer; and that not to suffer is in absolute, and even absurd, contradiction with the conditions of human existence. I will say no more to you to-day. You are not in a state in which words can comfort you. Go and whisper to the dead around you. Ask them for their secret; from every tomb will rise to you the echo of the sadnesses of others. May your own be thereby lessened! Bless you, my child!"

He made the sign of the cross above her head, and entered the church.

Claire stood motionless, for a while, in apathy.

Then a longing to make an effort and to be worthy of the Curé's kindness to her, arose within her. The energy of her character re-

asserted itself for an instant. She threw her head back, with the old motion that had been long unpractised; and, with a step that was almost steady, with a gaze that was almost clear, she moved forward to the gate and sat down upon the low wall beside it.

There, in the sunlight, she tried to think.

"Look at the graves," she murmured to herself; "yes, yes, I will. Perhaps a voice of comfort may come to me from one of them. Perhaps, as the Curé says, an echo of the sadnesses of others may lessen mine. Perhaps I shall learn that it is good to suffer. Oh, if only I could think that! Oh, if suffering could become a friend to me!"

She cast her eyes across the mounds before her and said, aloud, "Graves . . . speak to me. I will try to understand your language. You . . . fresh hillock, tell me your secret. You hold a child, I suppose—yes . . . Charles Dolet . . . aged four. Poor little fellow! He had not much time to make acquaintance with pain; but I daresay he had his share of it in some way, and that even he, in his small experience, was able to discover that life is not all joy.

"And you, well-kept grave that you are, with the fresh flowers and the trimmed grass, who is in you? Marie Ellemont, aged eighty-two. Ah! she, at all events, lived out her time. She must have been loved, for those she left behind her would not continue to adorn her resting-place in this way if she had been indifferent to them. And she has been dead nine years! Nine years, and they go on covering her with flowers! Nine years of love after death. Will any one love me for nine years after I die, and plant flowers on me? Am I jealous of Marie Ellemont? Is she an exception after death, as the Curé said some people are during life? Am I wrong to be surprised that she has left enduring affection behind her, and ought I not to feel, on the contrary, that the only true attachment is that which, after conquering all obstacles while life lasts, persists steadily in full force when life is over?

"This next grave is less well cared for—Jean Kergalou, aged twenty-six. He must have been a Breton, by his name; perhaps he died here amongst strangers. The loneliness of death seems always greater when it arrives away from home. Shall I die away

from home? But . . . have I a home? Hurley does not really feel to me like home. After all, the grave is the only home on which we can all surely count.

"But . . . the dead are teaching me nothing. Not one of them has answered me . . . I am very tired . . . Ah! where is the guidance the Curé told me to seek? Where am I to obtain submission if I cannot glean it even here? Why do not the graves speak to me? Have they no voice? The Curé said they had. He ought to know. He has seen many of them filled in. He could enumerate, I daresay, the sorrows that are buried in them. But, if he knew, he did not tell me. He left me to inquire for myself. Perhaps I do not speak the language of the dead. Perhaps they do not understand me. But they can see I suffer; so, if they have suffered too, there is a bond between us. Why are they not kinder to me?"

Then she was silent. She had no more thoughts. Her head was empty. She sat unconscious in the sunlight, and forgot that she was alive.

After a while she woke again, with a start, to reality. Once more she felt that she was

Claire. Black sadness rose again within her. She murmured, "Conrad! Conrad!"

And so the time passed on, mistily, unknowingly, in grief.

She looked again at the graves before her.

"Out there," she said, "is one that is utterly abandoned—abandoned, evidently, for years. What a growth of weeds and brambles! What is the lesson I ought to learn from that? Shall I be jealous of a friendless tomb, as I think I was, just now, of the bright garden that marks the place of Marie Ellemont?"

Then she got off the wall and walked, wearily and slowly, towards the tangled heap of branches, old and new, of ivy, of rank herbage, and of nettles, that covered the forgotten grave.

On reaching it she stood still and looked.

She murmured to herself, "What must this seem like in the winter, when all the green is gone? Forlorn it is, indeed, to-day; but nature, at all events, adorns it now with leaves that cost no money and claim no care, and even with a wild flower here and there. But in January its desolation must be awful. Will this lamentable spectacle fail, like all the

rest, to give me peace? Who is the poor creature that rests here and has left no cherishing hand behind? O God, help me to acquire resignation from this example of the end of all."

As she thought, almost aloud, she felt that her throat was turning dry and that her eyes were growing dizzy. Her will was weakening. She recognised, not only that she was relapsing into her habitual prostration, but that a new faintness, something more enervating, more shattering than she had known before, was creeping over her, and that she was becoming impotent. With an effort which she felt to be almost the last she could produce, but which she was impelled to make by some force within her, she advanced another step and sought, between the branches, for the name.

The vegetation was, however, so dense, so matted, that it was quite impossible to perceive letters. The very stone itself was hidden by the thick, knotted growth.

Claire looked and wondered.

"Why," she murmured, "do I feel this need to know who lies here? Is it simply from the human spirit of contradiction? Do I want to read this veiled name for the sole reason that

it is concealed? or is there in me some guiding impulse that I cannot measure? Surely it is not idle curiosity. The broken-hearted are not curious. Yet I do feel an unaccountable wish to know the secret of this forgotten grave. There is something which impels me. What is it? Can I draw back the branches?"

Using her parasol as a hook, she tried to pull aside the briers that covered up the tombstone. With difficulty, and with increasing unconsciousness, yet led on by an instinct she could not resist, she managed to tear off leaves at the lower end, and to lay bare some letters. The stone was, however, so darkened and discoloured, so overgrown with moss and lichens, that, even then, it was not easy to decipher the inscription. She stooped down to it. For some seconds she could see nothing. Her eyes were full of tears again. Her heart began to beat, her whole body to tremble. A strange excitement, inexplicable but intense, spread over her. For moments she lost the power of sight; and then, spasmodically, it rushed back to her with startling clearness. She leaned still lower over the stone. In one of her moments of clear vision she read—

"décédée le 3 Avril 1860,
à l'âge de 24 ans."

Claire stood up again and stared at the words. Slowly she repeated them aloud—

"décédée le 3 Avril 1860,
à l'âge de 24 ans."

"The 3d of April 1860? That was two days after I was born. O my God, my God, what teaching will you send me from this mournful tomb, from this forgotten soul who left the earth when I came on it? Was the Curé right in telling me to whisper to the dead? Is this the grave that is to give me peace?"

Again she stooped, and feverishly endeavoured to remove the growth from the upper part of the stone. It clung so closely and so firmly that she was obliged to use such force as she still possessed to get it off. At last a bundle of wide branches yielded and left a surface bare. The letters there were clearer; in an instant, Claire saw them all:—

"Ci-gît
CLAIRE,
épouse de . . ."

"Claire? . . ." she cried. "Claire? . . . Why

. . . what is the lesson here ? . . . What did the Curé mean ? . . . My name ? . . . Claire ? . . . The 3d of April ? . . . Oh, my head ! . . . My heart ! . . . Why was she called Claire ? . . . My God ! . . . My God ! . . . Help me ! . . . What is the rest ? . . . Great God ! what are the other letters ? "

Maddened by agitation she sprang at the remaining branches.

Convulsively she seized them with her hands.

They held so tight she could not move them.

She flung her arms around them.

She pulled—she dragged—she tore at them.

With a great wrench they crashed away, and there, before her, lay the entire epitaph :—

" Ci-gît
CLAIRE,
épouse de
CHARLES BRANDON,
Colonel dans l'armée Anglaise ;
décédée le 3 Avril 1860,
à l'âge de 24 ans.
Priez pour elle."

With straining eyes and opened mouth and clenched hands—breathless, staggering, throbbing—Claire stared at the lines before her.

At first she did not fully comprehend them.

But, by a fierce rush of knowledge, the truth, the whole truth, burst on her like a blaze of light.

With a suffocating, gasping voice, she cried, "My Mother!"

Then a great shriek rang through the air.

Wildly she waved her arms above her head, and fell senseless on the ground.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The shriek was heard all round, and people rushed, frightened, into the churchyard to see what accident had happened. The Curé, who was in the vestry, was the first to reach the spot and to lift up Claire. Others helped him to carry her to the nearest cottage, where she was laid on a bed. She was very pale, and totally unconscious, and as her face and hands were bruised and cut by the stones and splinters, and blood was flowing from the wounds, she seemed seriously hurt.

The Curé sent off a boy for the village doctor, and then he hastened back, in much excitement, to the place where Claire had fallen, to see if he could understand anything.

In the emotion of the first moment, when he had run out on hearing the cry, he had

perceived nothing but the prostrate form of Claire, and had had no eyes or thoughts for surrounding details. But, on returning to the grave, he saw, directly he got sight of it, that the branches had been torn away, and that the tombstone, with its inscription, was all bare.

This amazed him.

He knew that grave.

He had seen, as the slow years passed on, the moss gradually darken it, and the leaves hide it.

He had known the woman who rested in it.

For what reason had this stranger girl pulled off the tangled growth which no hand had ever disturbed, and which had thickened until it concealed everything beneath it?

He could not doubt that she had done it, for she alone had been there.

What imaginable motive could she have had?

And why, when she had dragged away the brambles, had she shrieked and fainted on the uncovered stone?

What could it all mean?

He had left her at the church door, in deep

distress, and had counselled her to go and commune with the dead.

What could have happened afterwards?

How could it be explained?

He gazed and wondered, in extreme disturbance.

As he wondered, there flashed before him—with that strangely vivid coruscating clearness which long-absent memories sometimes assume when suddenly they leap into us again—the vision of a face.

Startled, dazzled, he cried aloud, "Claire Halville!"

Then came a silence.

Agitated thoughts rushed through him.

"Claire Halville! . . . Claire Halville! . . ." he cried again. "It is . . . it is. When first I saw this girl . . . the other day . . . I had a dim impression . . . I could not explain why . . . that I had met her before. But . . . then . . . I remembered nothing. . . . I see it now. . . . It is Claire Halville restored to life! . . . The likeness is extraordinary."

He stopped and looked more carefully at the grave. He observed that almost every

branch was broken, into small pieces even; that the hard moss was scratched away in places; that the work of clearing the stone had evidently been performed with violence.

"What *can* it mean?" he asked again. "Why did she do this? And why did she swoon?"

He went on thinking, anxiously.

"Is it possible . . . oh, can it be possible . . . great God! . . . that she is the child? . . . I am bewildered . . . stupefied. Yes . . . I remember . . . I remember . . . the birth of the child . . . and the death of the poor mother . . . and the disappearance of the father . . . with the child. And this likeness! oh, this amazing likeness! . . . I see it . . . I am sure I see it all. . . . It *must* be! . . . Yes . . . it *must* be! . . . It was twenty-two years ago . . . and this girl appears to be about as old as that. But . . . yet . . . what can have given to her the incomprehensible idea of dragging all the vegetation from the grave? . . . And . . . more than all . . . what did she know about the grave? . . . She cannot have seen the name . . . for it was hidden by the leaves.

. . . She said nothing to me about it! . . . Surely she was ignorant of it! . . . And yet she found it! . . . Can she have come here to look for it? . . . It is impossible to suppose it was an accident . . . May God grant that she is not really hurt! . . . Yes . . . I see it more and more. . . . There is no room for doubt. . . . She must be Claire Halville's child."

Then, in deep commotion, he hurried to the cottage again, and learnt that, happily, the doctor had been caught, had come, and had examined Claire.

His report was that her heart was very weak, that the cuts were nothing, but that he supposed she had received a moral shock, and that he must wait to see what effect had been produced upon the brain.

He added, "If you know who she is, you had better send at once to her family or her friends, and tell them. We cannot take the responsibility of keeping her here, insensible."

As the Curé did not know her name, or where she came from, the pocket of her gown was emptied. In it was discovered, with her

handkerchief and purse, the letter she had received that morning from the schoolmistress at Hurley. It bore the address—

> *Miss Claire Brandon,*
>
> *Hôtel du Cheval Blanc,*
>
> *Honfleur.*

The Curé turned very pale.

He threw up his arms and exclaimed, "Claire? . . . Brandon? . . . The two names! . . . The names of Claire Halville and her husband! . . . It *is* the child! . . . Now it is quite certain. . . . Poor girl! . . . Poor girl! . . . She has found her name upon the stone . . . and has recognised her mother's grave! . . . But . . . still . . . how did she know that it was here?"

Then he turned quickly, much wrought-up, to the door, where the whole village had assembled, in curiosity and effervescence, and called out, "Who can run fastest? Boys, boys! who can run fastest? Henri Jelle, and you, Jules, and Georges Satterey out there, you

three can run, I know. Run, for the love of God, to Honfleur! Run as you never ran before. Run to the Cheval Blanc and tell the people that Mademoiselle Claire Brandon, who is staying there, has fainted, and that whoever is with her must come up at once. Run—run! I give ten sous to the one who gets there first."

Off started the three boys.

As hard as strength and will could carry them they tore headlong down the hill. Their local reputations of quick runners were at stake. And really they were interested in "the good young lady," who was so kind to the little ones, and wanted, honestly, to be of use to her. So on they shot at furious speed. The people on the road supposed they were racing for a prize, and cheered them as they rushed past. Panting, scarlet, straining, dripping, they dashed on, each doing his utmost all to win.

It happened that when the foremost of them, flagging, spent, and almost speechless, arrived at the hotel-door, Harriet Brandon had just returned from a stroll, and was standing looking to see if Claire was in sight.

The exhausted boy exclaimed, "Mademoiselle Claire Brandon is hurt, up at Iries. Somebody must go at once. I got here first."

Harriet Brandon heard the words, and staggered.

Her Claire—her life—was hurt!

She seized the boy, and, with her old impetuosity, poured out frightened questions.

"What is it?" she cried. "What has happened? Tell me! Tell me!"

As she asked, the two other boys came up, and there was an outpour from all three of them, of open-mouthed breathless explanations, all incorrect in detail, but all agreeing that Claire was at Iries, and was hurt.

"A carriage! a carriage!" shouted Harriet Brandon, maddened with terror. "Berthe! Berthe! Where is Berthe? Oh! a carriage—instantly!"

In the uncontrollable wildness of her agitation she wrung her hands, and seemed to have altogether lost her head.

A crowd collected. The visitors in the hotel came out to see what was the matter. Some people who were just starting for Trou-

ville, begged Harriet Brandon to take their carriage.

She sprang into it with Berthe, crying—"At full gallop! at full gallop!"

One of the boys scrambled on to the box to show the road.

The driver flogged his wretched horses; they plunged along as they had never gone before. But Harriet Brandon kept exclaiming, "Faster! faster! Gallop! gallop!"

Twelve minutes—twelve minutes of intense suffering for Harriet Brandon and for Berthe—were spent in covering the two miles.

At last they dashed into the village.

There was a cry of "Here they come!"

The driver checked his foaming horses.

The carriage stopped.

Eager hands snatched open the door. The throng made way. The men pulled off their caps in sympathy.

They saw Claire.

There she lay—white, disfigured, bleeding, senseless—on the cottage bed.

The Curé, the doctor, and two women were in the room.

Harriet Brandon rushed to the bedside, and

bent over Claire. After a few moments she fell upon her knees, hid her face in the coverlet, and sobbed convulsively.

As soon as she grew calmer, the Curé touched her on the shoulder and whispered, "Come out with me. I must tell you."

But in the next room the hysterical paroxysms continued, and some minutes passed before the Curé—intensely moved himself—could get her to listen to him.

At last he placed her in a chair, and said, excitedly, "She was alone in the churchyard. No one saw her. We heard a great scream! We ran and found her on the ground, insensible, as she is now. When we had brought her here and had sent for the doctor, I went back to look, and I saw, to my great surprise, that she had pulled all the plants and branches off a tombstone that was quite covered up by them. Upon that stone she had fallen. I should tell you there is an inscription on the stone—a name. I think it is her own name. She must have recognised it."

As he spoke, Harriet Brandon became more and more livid. Her eyes were stony; her lips hung apart; her hands shook violently.

With difficulty she stammered—" Her own name? What name? Oh! . . . what is the name?"

She was in such a state of heaving agitation that the Curé stared at her with alarm. He turned to Berthe, who had followed them to listen, and saw that she, with eyes and mouth wide open, with hands clutched to the sides of the chair into which she had just fallen, was gazing at him as if she had lost her reason.

" What is the name, I say?" repeated Harriet Brandon, in a voice that was not her own.

" It is the grave of Claire Halville," said the Curé. " But her name is not on the stone. Her husband's name is there. He was called Brandon, an English name."

Harriet Brandon rose up straight, and glared at him as if her entire power of life had passed into her eyes, as if her soul were breaking with the immensity of the concentration of her thought.

Then she gasped out hoarsely, stammeringly, falteringly, " You said . . . Brandon?"

" Yes, Brandon was her husband's name."

" Her husband? . . . Then . . . then . . . they were married?"

"Who were married?" asked the Curé, extremely puzzled at this last question.

Instead of answering him, Harriet Brandon dropped back heavily into the chair, and seemed stupefied.

Then Berthe muttered weakly, "Is it . . . is it . . . really . . . her mother's grave?"

"I think so . . . I believe so . . ." replied the Curé. "Indeed I feel certain of it. But can you give me no information as to what all this means?"

Berthe only mumbled, "We have been seeking for it for twenty years."

The Curé looked hesitatingly from each of them to the other, and comprehended nothing.

Soon afterwards Harriet Brandon moved again, and beckoned to him. With a great effort she whispered, in a half-suffocated tone, "Do you say . . . it is . . . it is . . . her mother's grave? Is it true? . . . Is it true? . . . How did she find it?"

"I think so . . . yes . . . I think so. . . . I do not know how she found it. . . . It is in the churchyard . . . there . . . where she fell."

"There!" murmured Harriet Brandon, very gently, as if her mind was wandering.

With a desperate pull upon herself, she managed to stand up again, and cried, huskily, "Take me there. . . . Oh, is it true? . . . Was she married? . . . Oh, for the love of God, do not deceive me! . . . Oh, do you know if she was married? . . . You said she had a husband? . . . Take me there . . . at once . . . that I may see."

"Of course she was married," replied the Curé; "married to the Englishman."

"Then . . . then . . . it is discovered! . . . discovered! Oh, is it true?"

"What is discovered?" thought the Curé, in utter bewilderment.

They went out slowly, the Curé and one of the women leading Harriet Brandon.

The crowd knew vaguely what was going on inside, and when she appeared in the sunlight, tottering, colourless, feeble, faint, her grey hair undone, her dress unbuttoned at the neck, clinging to the arms that held her, a murmur of distress rose up, and every heart beat for her.

They led her towards the churchyard gate.

The people followed, whispering, nervous, almost in awe.

Harriet Brandon strained her exhausted eyes before her and cried, in intense seeking, "Where? . . . Where?"

Berthe came behind, two women helping her.

They reached the grave.

Harriet Brandon read upon the moss-stained stone, amidst the cracked branches and crushed leaves, the words—

"CLAIRE,
épouse de
CHARLES BRANDON."

She bent down her whole body and sobbed.

Berthe knelt beside her.

Many of the women and the children knelt down too.

The others stood in reverent silence, the men bareheaded, as if it were a funeral.

There was a consciousness amongst them that something solemn was happening.

"But . . ." inquired Harriet Brandon, with an effort, ". . . if the stone was hidden by the branches . . . what made her pull them off? . . . How did she know? . . . Did no

one tell her? . . . And then . . . you say . . . she shrieked and fainted. . . . I understand. . . . She had seen her mother's name. . . . But . . . why is her mother here? . . . O God! . . . my God! . . . are you quite certain that they were married? . . . Oh, tell me!"

The Curé began to suspect that what was happening was very serious. But, before all the people of the village, he remained silent.

"Take me back . . ." said Harriet Brandon, feeling that her head was turning.

They found Claire in the same condition, still unconscious.

"Is she much hurt?" asked Harriet Brandon of the doctor.

"No, she is not much hurt. Indeed I may almost say that she is not hurt at all, exteriorly. These are mere scratches. But it is more and more evident, from the long duration of the syncope, that the mental shock has been very violent, and I can say nothing about the effect which may have been produced on the head. We must wait and see what turn it takes."

Harriet Brandon sat down at the bedside and covered her face with her hands, and tried to realise and understand.

She was too utterly upset, too weak. She had a sensation that a great event had come about, and that it was good. But she had no precise ideas.

Feebly, slowly, she gathered her intelligence together. She began to think—by degrees, irregularly, with interruption and disorder—but still, to think.

She was making obscure attempts to argue with herself, and to wonder what Claire knew, when she felt she was touched by some one, and looked up.

The Curé was at her side, pointing towards Claire.

Harriet Brandon sprang to her feet and bent over the bed.

Claire had slightly moved. A spasm had passed through her.

The doctor was listening to her respiration.

Her fingers opened.

Intently they all watched—scarcely breathing.

Another spasm shook her.

Her eyelids trembled. Slowly, heavily, they parted. But it seemed that no light came from under them.

They closed again.

A groan of disappointment broke from Harriet Brandon.

The doctor held up his hand for silence.

In another minute the eyelids moved once more. The head turned. A long low sigh was heard.

Suddenly, the eyes were wide open. They looked round the room. They had expression — they manifested faint surprise. They caught sight of Harriet Brandon, as she stooped forward, watching. They fixed themselves upon her—at first with vague unseeingness; then, gradually, with increasing consciousness. After a few instants there was sense in them. The corners of the mouth began to quiver. The whole face moved and took a meaning. The lips tried to shape a word. But the effort was beyond her strength. Again the eyes closed. Intelligence disappeared.

Some minutes passed; minutes of torturing suspense to Harriet Brandon, who asked

herself, in terror, whether reason was coming back or not.

Another shiver seized Claire.

Once more her eyes opened.

She spoke.

Her voice was low and changed; but they all heard it.

She said, "Where is it? . . . Is that you . . . my Tatte? I do not see clear. . . . What is the matter with me?"

She looked with wonderment at the persons round her. When her eyes reached the Curé they stopped. It was evident that she was trying to remember.

She sighed deeply, and then turned her eyes to the ceiling, struggling with recollection.

They all waited, listening gaspingly, for the next word.

Suddenly, her face grew anxious, deeply anxious; frightened, even. She tried to lift up her hand, to point to something. She fixed her eyes once more upon her aunt, and in an imploring tone she moaned, "What did I see? . . . I saw something. . . . What was it? . . . Tell me. . . . Tell me."

Harriet Brandon took her hands and whis-

pered, almost choked, "Darling . . . darling . . . you saw a name. . . . Do you remember? . . . It was . . . on a tomb."

Claire stared at her. Clear memory did not come.

Again they waited.

After another fit of trembling, Claire's face became suddenly convulsed. She screamed, "Oh! . . . oh! . . . there it is! . . . Claire . . . Claire . . . épouse de . . . Charles . . . Brandon . . . Oh! . . . oh! . . . oh! . . . My . . . mother!"

The exclamation was so fearful that Harriet Brandon staggered backwards from the bed.

In an instant Claire was calmer—as if the cry had relieved her.

Slowly, faintly, more words came from her: "What does it mean? . . . Is it the truth? . . . Did I find . . . her . . . grave? . . . Was it . . . my mother?"

"Yes, dearest, yes," exclaimed Harriet Brandon, following intently on Claire's face the effect of her declaration. "Yes, darling, yes. It is your dear mother. But you must not talk. Be content with that, for the moment. You will be happy. But ask no questions."

Claire closed her eyes. She was conscious only from time to time.

She seemed to fall asleep.

The doctor whispered, "I think we may hope, now, that the chance of inflammation of the brain has disappeared."

Then Harriet Brandon fancied she could safely leave the room for a few moments. She told Berthe to call her if Claire moved. She took the Curé with her, and said to him, vehemently, as soon as they were alone, "Why is her mother's grave at Iries? Why was she buried here? What can have made Claire look for it? Do you know anything about it? Was her mother really married? You cannot conceive the awful gravity of what is happening now. Have you any idea who the mother was?"

Then she fell, exhausted, into a chair.

The Curé stared at her with astonishment. "Have I any idea who the mother was?" he replied. "Why . . . her father was born in this village, and came back here to die. He, too, is in that churchyard. I married her to that Englishman, and . . ."

"You married her?" shouted Harriet Bran-

don, leaping wildly up again. "You married her? . . . Great God! . . . Oh, have we discovered it at last? . . . But . . . if you married her . . . it can be proved?"

"What can be proved? Proved that I married her? What do you mean by proved? It is in the register at the church. And one of the witnesses still lives in the village; only he has gone to-day to Lisieux, to the market."

"Oh, tell me, tell me!" cried Harriet Brandon, frantic with emotion, "do you know anything about the birth of Claire? Can that be proved too?"

"Who? Claire? Claire Halville?"

"No, the child; my Claire."

"The child? Can the birth of Claire Halville's child be proved? Really, I do not understand you. The child was born in that red house opposite; the one with the two chimneys. I baptised her, and I buried the poor mother. Of course it can be proved. Who doubts it?"

"Who doubts it?" echoed Harriet Brandon, in a bursting cry of joy and triumph. "No one will doubt it now. My Claire is saved!

My Claire will be happy! Oh, thank God! thank God! But . . . go on . . . go on . . . I entreat you. Tell me all . . . all the details. You cannot picture to yourself . . . no, nothing could convey to you . . . no language could express to you . . . the immensity of the importance of all this. I will not interrupt you. Go on, go on, I beg you."

And Harriet Brandon leaned forward in her chair, her hands joined, her eyes fixed, her entire nature strained to the highest pitch of sensation and attention.

The Curé, puzzled, comprehending nothing, asked, "But what am I to tell you? What details?"

"What details? Why, you have said you married them — that you knew the mother. Tell me all—all. Go on, I implore you."

It became more and more evident to the Curé that Harriet Brandon must have very urgent reasons for desiring information. So he began, "It is so simple that I do not understand your questions. But I will tell you what I know. Claire Halville, who is buried there, was, I suppose, the mother of this young lady."

"Yes . . . yes . . . of course she was," broke in Harriet Brandon, feverishly.

"The father of Claire Halville — Colonel Halville—was born at Iries. I did not know much of him, but I can tell you that his parents were small landowners about here, and that he was their only child. He became a soldier, and I have heard that, when they died and he inherited the property, he sold it all, and that no more was heard of him for many years. But, at the end of 1858, he returned to Iries, as many people come back in old age to their first home. He took that red house, which happened to be vacant. He was very ill; for he had been dangerously wounded at Sebastopol, and had not recovered. At that time I had just been appointed Curé of this parish. He brought his daughter with him. She came to me at once and expressed much anxiety about her father. After a time, she told me that a few months before, at Barèges, where her father had been sent to take the waters, for his wound, they met an English colonel, who had known her father in the Crimea, and who also had come there for the treatment, and that she was going to be married

to the Englishman, and would want a dispensation, because he was a Protestant."

"But no dispensation was got," interrupted Harriet Brandon.

"Not got? I got it myself," asserted the Curé.

"But at Rouen they declared no dispensation had been asked for."

"Rouen? What has Rouen to do with it? We are in the diocese of Bayeux here, and I obtained the dispensation from my bishop."

"Oh, if we had known!" exclaimed Harriet Brandon.

Then he went on again. "Afterwards she told me that the English colonel . . ."

"He was my brother . . . my poor brother," broke in Harriet Brandon. "But . . . I beg your pardon. Go on . . . pray go on. I am so painfully impatient to hear all."

"Well, that the English colonel had some reason for not informing his family that he was about to be married; and she asked my advice about it. I told her I could never recommend any one to enter into marriage unless the families, on both sides, knew everything and gave their full consent. But she

did not act on the counsel I gave her. A few weeks later, she came to me to announce that the English colonel had been to England for his papers, and that the marriage was to take place at once; though it was to be kept secret, for a time, from the family of the Englishman, because of some fear about the inheritance of a property."

"Quite true! quite true!" murmured Harriet Brandon. "How this confirms everything!"

During all this I had opportunities of becoming well acquainted with Claire Halville. I found in her many admirable qualities, and I was much interested in her, and had a high esteem for her. The civil marriage was contracted at the Mairie of this Commune. . . ."

"It can be proved?"

"If you will come to the Mairie with me for five minutes, as soon as you are well enough, you can see it registered in the books there; and, as I said just now, I performed the religious ceremony."

"Oh, if only we had known it!" sighed Harriet Brandon. "But, thank God, we know it now."

"Soon after the marriage," went on the Curé, "Colonel Halville died. The Englishman was so fond of his wife that he did everything she wished, and when she expressed to him, after her father's death, a desire to stay here for a time, he did not refuse, and they went on living in the house that Colonel Halville had hired. But, though he loved his wife so much, she was not quite happy, because he would not avow the marriage to his relations. She often spoke to me about it, and told me he was quite frightened at the idea that it might become known in England. He took, even, such pains to conceal his address from his family, that both he and his English servant crossed in the steamer to Havre, and then went by railway to Rouen, in order to post letters and to receive the replies which were addressed to them there."

"Then it was true," cried Harriet Brandon, "that, as we thought afterwards, they only went to Rouen about letters. Oh, if we had inquired in this department! But we never thought of searching so far away from Rouen."

"I did not like it at all," continued the

Curé; "but Madame Brandon begged me to say nothing to her husband. Then the child was born, and the mother died. A wet-nurse was found in a neighbouring village. But the English colonel would not stop here. He was terribly affected by his wife's death, and told me he could not remain at Iries then, but that he would come back again, later on, to visit his wife's grave. So he went away, and took with him the child and the nurse. Ten or eleven months afterwards the nurse returned. She came one day to Iries and told us that the child was weaned, and that the father was very sad, and was always travelling to console himself. And from that time to this no one at Iries has ever heard anything more about him."

"But the advertisements in the papers? and the bills we stuck up last year? Was nothing heard of them here?" asked Harriet Brandon, in an astonished tone.

"What advertisements?" replied the Curé. "In what papers? What bills?"

"Why, the advertisements we inserted twenty years ago in the newspapers at Paris, and Rouen, and Havre, offering rewards for

evidence of the marriage. And the posting-bills we put up last year for the same purpose."

"We never heard of them. No Paris paper ever comes to this out-of-the-way village. Nor papers from the other side of the Seine either. It is another department over there, with the mouth of the river between us. That is the Seine Inférieure; here we are in Calvados. As for posting-bills, I never saw one. But why did you want evidence of the marriage?"

"Why did we want evidence of the marriage? To prove it, Monsieur le Curé. You do not know—I will explain the details to you at another time—what frightful consequences have ensued from the absence of that evidence. My brother, as you are aware, kept the marriage secret; it was not till he was dying that he wrote to tell us of it; and then, by the most cruel misfortune, the certificates he sent to us were lost. The result was that the marriage was disputed, because of the property, and that the child . . . my Claire . . . who is lying on that bed . . . was declared to be illegitimate, because we could

obtain no proofs. Her life has been destroyed by it. It has been impossible for her to marry —although she loved. She has very nearly died of despair."

"I am beginning to comprehend," said the Curé. "She told me about her sadness; but, of course, I knew nothing of its cause. In talking to her this morning, before she found the grave, I spoke to her of the wonderful mercy of God, and said that, perhaps, she might be near the end of her trial. Little did I think what I was saying, or that I was selected by Providence to give you the information you required."

"How stupendous!" cried Harriet Brandon, who, under the influence of the news, had regained strength and energy. "Oh, Claire! dear Claire! But what could it have been that made her look at that grave? It is incomprehensible. We must wait to know until she is fit to tell us."

"Her likeness to her mother is astonishing," said the Curé, musingly. "I ought to have recognised her at once. But I did not think of it. It was so long ago."

At that moment Berthe opened the door,

and said, "Mademoiselle Claire has woke, and seems much better."

Harriet Brandon ran to her, longing to tell everything. But the doctor, suspecting that she was going to speak, entreated her to be silent.

Claire smiled faintly to her aunt, and murmured, "What does it mean? May I hope? Is there anything?"

"Yes, darling, yes; indeed you may hope. Oh, you will be happy! Oh, my darling, my darling, we know all!"

Claire whispered, "Conrad!" and closed her eyes again.

CHAPTER XXIX.

In another hour Claire was so much better that the doctor permitted Harriet Brandon to tell her the main facts of the Curé's story.

She listened in marvelling happiness, with a radiant glow upon her face.

Exclamations of astonishment and delight broke from her.

As soon as she had heard all, she drew her aunt close to her and whispered—"He must come . . . at once. . . . He must come . . . for his wife!"

The improvement became so marked that, after a while, the doctor began to think she might be removed to Honfleur, and asked her if she felt she could bear the journey.

Her answer was—"Yes . . . certainly . . . I am well enough now. But . . . before I

go . . . I must . . . go back . . . there . . . and . . . look again. . . . I have not seen yet. . . . I must go . . . to *her*."

This alarmed Harriet Brandon. She urged that it was imprudent to expose Claire to more emotions.

But the Curé and the doctor pointed out that, as the only road lay alongside the churchyard wall, it would be impossible to hide the grave from her as she passed; and that, consequently, as she must of necessity be exposed to the thrill of seeing it, no real harm could be done by allowing her to go straight to it as she desired.

She had not, however, as much strength as she imagined. When she was helped off the bed and tried to stand, she seemed to be on the point of fainting again. They were obliged to put her on a chair and to carry her to the churchyard.

The whole village followed.

When the chair was set down at the foot of the grave, Claire gazed tenderly, unsteadily, tremblingly.

She saw the strange destruction that her own hands had wrought.

Amidst the torn branches stood out her mother's name.

After a long faltering look, she shut her eyes. For some time they remained closed. She had joined her hands. It was evident that she was praying.

When she raised her head again she murmured, with a faint smile, "Tatte, prayer has come back to me! Oh, what delight! Oh, how I have thanked God . . . and *her!*"

As she looked again with tears of sweetness, a little child was pushed through the crowd by its mother, came to her half frightenedly, and held out a handful of fresh flowers.

"Flowers . . . to put there," lisped the child, with timid awkwardness.

"Ah . . . yes," cried Claire, deeply moved. "Yes . . . flowers in the place of thorns . . . on this tomb . . . as in my spirit. Thank you, thank you, dear little child."

She leaned forward and cast the flowers, one by one, slowly and reverently on the stone.

Then other children broke away and ran to the cottage gardens, and hurried eagerly back,

all bearing flowers. Soon the whole grave was hidden beneath a pile of many-coloured petals.

The peasants, seeing this, confided to each other the two opinions, that it would gladden the young lady to leave the grave with flowers on it, and that the change might bring good luck to the village.

"Now, take her into the church," ordered the Curé.

The chair was lifted up once more, and Claire was placed before the altar.

"I must kneel . . . I must kneel," she insisted.

Her aunt and Berthe moved her to the step, placed her arms upon the altar-rail, and held her.

The Curé recited the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria, and the Gloria Patri, the people repeating them with him, aloud.

At last the doctor required that Claire should be taken out, declaring that she could bear no more.

A shutter, with a mattress, had been arranged in the carriage. She was lifted on to it. Her aunt and Berthe got in at her side, and, at a foot-pace, they moved away.

Harriet Brandon had arranged with the doctor and the Curé to come to them next morning.

Men, women, and children accompanied them to the end of the village. A few persons walked down to Honfleur at the side of the carriage.

The journey passed off quietly.

Claire seemed almost asleep.

The arrival at the hotel produced a sensation. There had been talk at Honfleur of the run in of the three boys and of the sudden departure of Harriet Brandon. So, when Claire was brought back on the mattress, pale and cut, and when the people who had come from Iries told the strange story of the discovery of the grave, there was much excitement in the town. It took the form of real sympathy and respect. Kind inquiries were made about Claire's condition.

As soon as she was safely in her bed, Harriet Brandon sat down, triumphantly, to write telegrams.

The first was to Count Hohenwalden: "A miracle! Everything is discovered. We have the proofs. She calls you to her as fast as you can travel. Answer instantly."

To Madame d'Héristal and Madame de Rochedure the words were: "With inexpressible joy I announce to you that the marriage is discovered. Claire very weak and shaken. We trust you can join us at once."

To Mr Cumber she said: "By a most extraordinary accident we have found out all about the marriage. Send Mr Gray here directly to see that the proofs are in proper legal form. Let everybody know at Hurley. We shall come home as quickly as possible."

She showed Claire the telegrams, and tried to guess, with her, how soon answers could arrive.

The evening passed in delicious, tender joy, in outpourings of bright hopes, in exultant picturings of the morrow. Claire was feeble, sore, and stiff, but the overflowing gladness of her heart made her forget the prostration of her body.

She repeated to her aunt, with feverish narration, what had occurred in the church and churchyard, and all that she remembered of the details of the strange discovery of the grave. Her impression of them was confused. The emotion had been so violent that she had retained no precise consciousness of the final

tearing away of the branches. She recollected almost everything she had done until she saw the first words of the inscription; but from that moment her memory of her actions was obscure. All she knew with certainty was that she was impelled by a force she could not resist. The rest was darkness to her. Yet the epitaph, as a whole, had remained fixed in her heart with startling clearness.

When she had finished her tale, her aunt described to her the arrival of the boys at the hotel; the terrible excitement she had endured; the furious gallop up the hill; the sight of the white, bleeding face upon the bed; the explanations of the Curé; and the return to consciousness of Claire.

They lost themselves in wonder, in rejoicing, and in gratitude, and asked each other how so vast a joy could have really come to them, in such a manner?

Claire said, "After all, it is quite simple. God had pity on me. He took me by the hand and led me."

And there was more intensity of delight, more thanksgiving, more wild dreaming of the future.

It was late before they could decide to cease their talk and to say good night.

At last Claire was alone.

She joined her hands and whispered, in the darkness, "Mother . . . mother . . . mother dearest . . . may it be given to you to know that your child has found you and that she loves you! May your rest be brightened by my joy! Mother . . . you have saved your child to-day."

Then she prayed until her thoughts were lost in sleep.

In the morning she was very weary and ached all over, but so full of sunshine and of rapture that it seemed to her she could fly up into the air.

The Curé and the doctor arrived together, early.

Claire said that she desired to return to Iries; but the doctor would not hear of it, and insisted that she should remain in bed.

Harriet Brandon profited by the opportunity to tell the Curé the story of Claire's life. He listened with the intensest interest, and never ceased to exclaim, with wonderment, "It is indeed a privilege for me to have been

selected, in my old age, as the instrument of the discovery."

At eleven a telegram was brought up. Harriet Brandon tore it open and shouted, "From *him,* Claire!"

"I cannot breathe for joy. I am scarcely able to believe it. I start by the express at noon. If I catch a train on in Paris, I shall be with you in the morning the day after to-morrow. Will telegraph again from Paris."

"What gladness! what delight!" cried Claire. "But — still — forty-eight hours to wait."

Successively the answers of the others came. All were in words of emotion and delight. Madame d'Héristal announced that she and her brother would be at Honfleur in the afternoon of the next day. Madame de Rochedure, who was staying in Burgundy, telegraphed that she could not reach them till rather late in the evening. Mr Cumber sent warm congratulations, and said that Mr Gray had started.

It seemed to them, as the hours passed, that their felicity grew greater, deeper, stronger.

Words burst from Claire: "My thoughts are ceaseless songs of bliss! To what giddy heights the power of joy can rise! When I look back, when I look down, when I look behind, I see—away, away—a distance and a depth so vast that no measure, however limitless, can gauge them. And the darkness of the past! Aunt, that darkness is so prodigious that even this bursting, resplendent light is powerless to brighten it. Ah, I have suffered! Ah, I have known grief! Out of that black blackness have I leaped! Glory be to God! I do not understand—now—that I have had the force to stand up against such sorrow. I had lost Conrad! I had lost Conrad! And yet, this inconceivable intoxication of reaction does not harm me! Why? How can I support such ecstasy of happiness? The radiance of my rapture seems even more immeasurable than the intensity of my woe! But I have no hurt from it! I feel simply like a leaf that has been sweetly rained upon after long burning dryness."

"Darling, this is because you deserve your joy," answered Harriet Brandon, smiling. "You have earned it by accepting trial. That is the

explanation. It is for that reason that joy will not kill you, as it has killed others."

"Yes, Tatte, yes; that may be it. I thought, till yesterday, that it was quite natural to die of pain. I do not think, to-day, that it would be at all natural to die of joy. Perhaps it is because my joy is not complete, because I have to wait for Conrad! Oh, why is he not here?"

After a silence of soft smiles and infinitely soothing serenity, Claire went on again, "I feel that I have won him . . . that I have deserved him! Would his mother tell me still that I am unworthy of him? Her shadow cannot stand between us now. I can take his name and hold my head high."

She murmured, "Conrad . . . Conrad . . . come."

Next day she was so much stronger that she declared she would go at once to Iries, in order to be back in the afternoon to receive Madame d'Héristal and M. de Morvan. So they sent up a messenger to the Curé to warn him they were coming.

Her entrance to the village was a triumph. The people were really kind-hearted, and were

honestly glad that the young lady had found her mother; but they were true peasants and true Normans, and had of course the cunning hearts of their race. Pocket interest was more than life to them, and they had begun to calculate the profits they might extract from Claire. They had found out that she was rich, and each one of them had already based a personal speculation on her emotion and her generosity. The owner of the cottage to which she had been carried when she had fainted, was the object of universal jealousy; her neighbours imagined, spitefully, that she might perhaps get so vast a sum as fifty francs for her hospitality.

Under these preoccupations, they welcomed Claire with shouts, with much waving of hats and offering of flowers.

Harriet Brandon, Claire, and Berthe left the carriage at the churchyard gate, and paid, first of all, another visit to the grave.

Claire asked the Curé to choose a man to arrange it, to put a railing round it, and to keep it planted with fresh flowers.

Then she told the Curé that, with his permission, she would restore the church, and

would send an architect from Honfleur to confer with him about it.

From the church she went to the cottage, and bewildered every one by laying a note for five hundred francs upon the table.

She gave a hundred francs to each of the three boys who had run to Honfleur, and the same sum to the child who had brought her the first flowers for the grave.

As the effect of these gifts was to fill with bitterness all those who received nothing, everybody tried to invent means for attracting Claire's attention to themselves. Some of the children were instigated by their mothers, in the hope of pay, to propose to sing a hymn to her. More flowers were carried to the grave, and the people took care to let Claire know that they were the givers.

The books were examined, at the Mairie and the church. Claire read, with deep emotion, the signatures of her father and mother. The surviving witness of the marriage was brought to her. He was the former schoolmaster at Iries. Claire asked him to accept her watch as a memorial. He was glad to

take it, but he would have preferred money, though he did not dare to say so.

When all the debts were paid, and when Claire had asked the Mayor and Curé to consider together in what permanent form she could be of use to the village, the Curé took them to the red house. The inmates—the family of a retired sea-captain from Honfleur—expected them, and had put clean white curtains and fresh flowers in the room in which Claire was born and her mother had died. With delicacy and discretion, the people accompanied them only to the door, and left them to enter alone.

Claire looked around her, in deep agitation.

Her aunt took her hand and obliged her to sit down.

"It was here . . ." murmured Claire. "She saw me . . . here. . . . I was not a stranger to her . . . as . . . alas! . . . she is to me. . . . She kissed me . . . in this room . . . before she died! . . . And my father . . . my poor father . . . he, too, was here! . . . I was taken from this room . . . to begin my life . . . and to accept its pains . . . and to

find in you . . . sweet Tatte . . . another mother . . . to replace the one . . . who died here. . . . I come back to this room . . . with you . . . dear aunt and second mother . . . in the greatest joy that my soul can dream of. . . . O my God, I thank you! . . . and you . . . dear Tatte . . . I do indeed thank you . . . for *them* . . . as well as for myself. . . . Father and mother . . . do you hear me? . . . Give to us both . . . to my dear aunt and to me . . . your blessing . . . in this room."

They knelt together and prayed and sobbed.

When they stood up again, Harriet Brandon looked at Claire, and breathed, from the very bottom of her soul, "Darling! My child!"

As she spoke, there came to her the echo of the same three words, pronounced by her at Hurley twenty years before—when all seemed lost. In an instant, the whole history of Claire rolled before her eyes, and she felt that great trial is the only road to great peace.

They got back to Honfleur to lunch, and were able to rest a little before Madame d'Hérістal and her brother arrived, at three o'clock.

The meeting with them was very affecting,

for they were so intensely eager to hear the details that their excitement renewed the emotion of the Brandons. M. de Morvan was particularly disturbed; he had formed so profound an affection for Claire, had entered so eagerly into her existence, had interested himself so enthusiastically in her character, and had suffered so painfully from the events which had followed the revelation of her birth, that the story of the discovery of the tomb upset altogether his tender fervent nature. That Claire should be saved in such a fashion appeared to him beyond the limits of the possible. He exclaimed, each moment, as he listened, "Can it be? Inconceivable! Miraculous!"

But soon relief began to conquer stupefaction, delight to take the place of incredulity, and M. de Morvan became almost the happiest of them all.

At ten in the evening Madame de Rochedure entered like a tempest, flung herself on Claire, embraced her vehemently, and cried, "How did it happen? I am exploding to know. Oh, Claire, I am so pleased! Now, tell me—and get married."

But notwithstanding her excitement, she heard the tale without astonishment, did not interrupt, and observed, almost calmly, when it was finished, "Excessively interesting! Yes, really, very interesting! But so simple! Disappointingly, guilelessly simple! I took it for granted, naturally, when I got your telegram, that the process of discovery had been infinitely more tremendous than that. I counted on something extravagantly astounding and outrageously unbelievable. And it is only this! Why, Claire, it is so artlessly ingenuous that it is altogether mean. Still, it is excessively humiliating for the detectives—and for me—that you should have found it out all by yourself."

"You call it simple—artless—mean?" exclaimed M. de Morvan, indignantly. "I see in it, madame, a direct and most manifest intervention of the finger of Providence."

"Oh, my dear Count," laughed Madame de Rochedure, "if you are going to describe it in that way, pray do not content yourself with the finger; put in the wrist and elbow while you are about it, so as to make the operation more apparent. Chance or Providence—it is

all the same to me. I kiss Claire and I applaud destiny. By the way, Claire, do you remember that once at Ems we had a talk about this very question of chance?"

"I recollect it, Jeanne. I told you I did not believe in chance because I could not appeal to it. I say the same now. I do not admit that I was led to Iries by blind hazard, or that I began to draw back those branches by what you would denominate mere luck."

"I will not quarrel, delightful Claire, with your theory of 'a guiding hand.' It is very pretty and comforting, and it may possibly be true. So many things may possibly be true! But I find it more rational to trust to Fortune. If I had been a Roman matron, instead of a Parisienne, I should have offered frequent sacrifice to her. In fact I should do so now if only there were pagan altars on the Boulevard. If you will not thank her yourself, permit me to do so for you."

"My thanks are addressed elsewhere," answered Claire, gravely.

"Well, as I have come to rejoice with you, not to dispute with you, I will let you have

your own way. Where is the very noble Austrian? When is he to join in the pæan?"

"We expect him some time to-morrow morning," said Harriet Brandon.

"When will you leave for Hurley?" inquired Madame d'Héristal, who was beginning to think it was time to stop the exuberance of Madame de Rochedure.

"As soon as I am really well," replied Claire. "My aunt and I are very anxious to get home. Do you observe—I say 'home'? I have never been able yet to call Hurley 'home'; but everything is now so changed around me, that you see the word comes to me quite naturally."

"You could not supply to us a brighter sign of your condition," remarked M. de Morvan, affectionately.

"And now I am going to astonish you by my reasonableness," exclaimed Madame de Rochedure. "Claire will have a stimulating day to-morrow. I propose, therefore, that we should let her go to sleep—if she can. Subsidiarily, I am abominably tired after so much travelling. Finally, I am ashamed of my yellow bills, and need to hide myself. I

invented that gorgeous scheme—and I failed. Claire strolled, accidentally, up a hill—and found out everything. What will my notary say when he hears it? He will despise me. Fancy being despised by a notary! All the same, Claire, it is the vastest joy of my life. It is true I have not had many joys. I feel inclined to cry. Decidedly, I am nervous. Good night."

Next morning early a telegram arrived from Count Hohenwalden. It informed them that he had reached Paris and would be at Honfleur at twelve.

Claire was in a beating fermentation of unpreparedness and delight. It seemed to her, as the moment grew nearer, that when Conrad rushed into the room, she would not have one word to say to him. What language could she use that would express—however meagrely—the immensity of her emotions; that would paint—however colourlessly—the contrast between the anguish of the past and the rapture of the present? Never was the stinted insufficiency of speech so irritating to her; never did the undefinable glories of passionate sensation appear to her to lie so

hopelessly beyond the possibility of expressing them. He was coming; she felt everything; she could say nothing.

As she sat and mourned over the unworthiness of words, the door opened quietly and Madame de Rochedure came in. She was pale and looked unwell.

"Good morning, Claire," she said. "I am glad to find you alone. I have had a bad night. All this has shaken me. I have gone through more agitation since I got that telegram to tell me you are happy, than I have experienced since the moment when I recognised that my marriage was a failure. I hate to be ridiculous, and I think I hate to be selfish; and yet, I am distinctly conscious that I am both. Your joy makes me think of nothing but myself; and I am absurd enough to talk to you about myself at the very moment when your adored adorer is about to bound into your arms. I am under the impression, Claire, that your good fortune is going to drive me mad—by comparison."

"Poor Jeanne," said Claire, taking her hand. "I have told you already that your case is a bad one. But there is hope for all of us. My

adventures give proof of that. I think that my good fortune, as you call it, ought to encourage you to expect, for yourself, some favours from your trusted goddess."

"No, Claire. Fortune is powerless to change my worthless husband's nature. My fate is to remain bound to a man I hate and despise; and I rebel against it. You and Conrad have set before me a new idea of the possibilities of marriage. The spectacle of your success makes my own failure all the more unbearable. I am jealous of your happiness. That is the simple truth. You see I am not worthy to be your friend."

"You sadden me, dear Jeanne. You are so full of merits and capacities, you have so great a power of attachment, that what you describe as your 'failure' is all the more distressing to me. Alas! I see no remedy. Even the 'will' I talked of before I knew your character, would serve you for very little. And furthermore, I am obliged to confess to you that will has not been to me, in my own sorrow, the faithful upholder I had counted on. You may find palliatives for your pain, but I will not deceive you by pretending that I see a chance of cure.

You have my very tenderest sympathy—and it is all the deeper and more earnest because of my own prosperity. But barren wishes are all that I can offer you."

"Exactly; I knew that. Now I am going to Havre. I have not the courage to be here when he arrives. When I come back, by the afternoon boat, it will be over, and I shall avoid the suffering of looking on. I suppose that you, Claire, would not have had the same envious feeling towards me if my husband were suddenly converted into an honest man?"

"Indeed, no, my poor Jeanne," replied Claire, with a sigh. "Poor Jeanne!"

Then Madame de Rochedure was gone.

At half-past eleven Harriet Brandon and M. de Morvan went to the station to meet Count Hohenwalden.

Madame d'Héristal remained with Claire. From time to time they looked at each other and tried to smile; but neither of them spoke.

The throbbing throes of Claire were tearing her. It seemed to her that the hour had ceased to advance. She waited. She listened. She yearned for the sound of wheels.

But no sound came—none but of the wild

beating of her heart. The minutes were unmeasurable.

Hearkening, febrile, breathless, she expected.

At last—at last—her straining ears caught a faint distant roll.

It grew. It neared. It came.

A carriage stopped at the hotel door.

Claire rose—tottering, shivering.

Madame d'Héristal kissed her and left her.

Leaping feet dashed up the stairs.

In the centre of the room Claire stood, rooted, transfixed, her hands upraised, her eyes in flame, before the wide-opened door.

A shadow filled it. Arms seized her.

There was a cry, "Claire!"

Faintly she echoed, "Conrad!"

For a long minute, motionless, they held each other clasped.

Then, still locked together, they lifted up their heads and gazed.

They did not need to speak.

They saw and knew.

From their eyes poured out—with passion beyond words—the torrent of their love.

Sometimes they whispered—

"Conrad!"

"Claire!"

They had nothing else to say.

Holding each other's hands, they sat down, side by side. But still they did not speak. It was enough for them to look.

After a while Conrad murmured in a low voice, "My wife!"

And Claire answered, "My husband!"

Those words sufficed to blot out the past and to set forth the future.

Another long silence followed.

It was broken by Claire.

"At last!" she cried. "At last! We have lived through it! It has not killed us! I do not understand that I am alive; or that, being alive, I have not lost my reason."

"Forget it, Claire. Forget it—for to-day, at least. Hold my hands—closer, closer. Plunge your eyes more deeply into mine. Have no thought—not one—but love. I do not even ask you how the discovery was made. I care for nothing—nothing—but for your presence at my side, and for the knowledge that you are mine, and that we part no more. I have no other consciousness."

"And I, my Conrad, could almost thank the awful past for leading us to the glorious present. It is only by looking backward at the darkness out of which we have emerged that I can gather a vague conception of the intensity of the brilliancy I see. Even with that supreme comparison to guide me, I know that I can form no real idea of my delight. It is fathomless, shoreless, boundless, beyond all dreaming. We had lost all, and we have found all. We were parted for ever, and we are joined for ever. We had perished and we are reborn."

"To me there is no change," exclaimed Conrad. "We go on—that is all. There was a chasm, but it is filled up. I have forgotten that it was. Remember that the past has always been a difficulty to me. Now, as before, I thrust it aside—and for the same reason—because the present calls me. Listen, Claire, to its appealing voice! Listen to the soft song it sings! Was there ever music such as thrills around us now? The air we breathe is melody. I am deaf to every other sound. And more than all, the future hears the harmony of the present, and is learning

its sweet strains, so that it may echo them to us without cease."

"You sing too, Conrad—like the present. I listen in ecstasy. Sing on."

She laid her head upon his shoulder and closed her eyes.

"It is not true that we have been separated," he whispered to her. "It is impossible to believe, now, that we have not always been together. It is not true that we have suffered. It is impossible to believe, now, that pain can be. It is not true that we have doubted. It is impossible to admit, now, that disbelief exists. All is eternal union, bliss, and certainty."

"Sing on, Conrad," she murmured, her eyes still closed, with a smile of raptured tenderness. "Sing on."

"And your voice, sweet Claire? Am I not to hear its golden accents? Will you not take your part in the chant of joy? Shall we not sing in unison?"

"I can but repeat your words, my Conrad. All is union, bliss, and certainty."

"And say you love me, Claire."

She started up; she threw her head back;

a burst of triumphant brightness flashed upon her face; she cried, "I love you, as the flowers love the sunlight in which they bloom; as the waves love the breeze in which they dance; as the stars love the heaven in which they shine. I love you with every thought and faculty and force within me. I love you as the result loves its cause; as the thing made loves its maker. I love you as my hope, my trust, my guide, my strength, my light, my life."

Conrad echoed gently, "My light, my life!"

Once more there was silence.

She grew calm again. "We are selfish, my Conrad. We think only of ourselves. In our vast gladness we are not generous to others. My aunt is waiting, longing. More than ever, she is my mother. The details of the discovery must be told to you in her presence. . . ."

"I heard a few words from her at the station," said Conrad.

"Let us call her. Let us join her to our joy."

Harriet Brandon came.

Conrad listened almost with indifference to the explanation. To him the interest of the

story was in its consequences. Claire was his The manner how and the reason why, were, for the moment at least, of comparatively small importance.

Then they were alone again, and talked, once more, of love. And they had so much to say, and all they said appeared to them so new, that they almost fancied they had never known how to speak of love before.

At four o'clock they started for Iries.

The drive was delicious. It seemed to Claire that every bird and every flower sang and blossomed expressly for her. How different from that sad walk, three days before, when all the brightness was but gloom; when nature—once her tender friend—had become a mocking stranger to her!

She took Conrad to the churchyard. She led him to the grave—already gardened up and planted. She said to him, "The briers are all gone. May we never see briers again!"

The Curé joined them. The village people grouped around them. Madame d'Héristal and M. de Morvan, who had come up with them, were taken off by Harriet Brandon to see the room in the red house.

Claire and Conrad stood for some minutes at the grave. Then they moved to the church door, and Claire was pointing to the place where she had sat upon the wall, when, to their surprise, a carriage drove up, and Madame de Rochedure sprang out of it.

"I got back from Havre," she exclaimed, "ten minutes after you had started! How are you, my dear Count? Delighted to congratulate you. You look happier than when I saw you last. I was able to procure a conveyance — means of transport are not abundant at Honfleur—and I have followed you. So—it is here? Pretty village, certainly. Good day, Monsieur le Curé. I have heard all about you. I am certain you are not aware what an important personage you are. Conceive that, but for you, these two eager candidates for immediate matrimony would have beheld each other no more. Monsieur le Curé, you may say to yourself, in all truth, like Cardinal de Richelieu, 'I have been useful.' I envy you—and the Cardinal; for I, most certainly, shall never be able to take that view of my occupations."

"Monsieur le Curé," put in Claire, who did

not know what might be coming next and thought it prudent to interrupt—"this is a great friend of mine, the Marquise de Rochedure. She has followed closely the working out of my recent history, and she is excessively impressed, as you see, by the events in which you have had so large a share."

"Oh, excessively impressed, Monsieur le Curé. Which is the red house, Claire? I shall put up a marble slab on that house to inform passers-by that 'Here was born Claire Brandon, who very nearly did not marry Conrad Hohenwalden.'"

The Curé opened his eyes with bewilderment. Madame de Rochedure appeared to him to belong to another earth from that on which he humbly lived.

"And this is the churchyard where you had all those emotions, Claire? I wonder if I, too, could get emotions here? I absolutely need to trust in something, even if it be only—a grave. When I was at school I copied many times, 'Fortune favours the bold'—only it was in Latin. I think, now, that it was a singularly revolutionary principle to instil into a little girl; but I accepted it as a guiding light

in life; I learnt from it to believe in fortune and to be bold. Now you, Claire, have never been bold at all; therefore, why should you be favoured? What is your view of the moral value of boldness, Monsieur le Curé?"

The Curé was frightened. He thought Madame de Rochedure a very horrible person, and felt inclined to run away. Never had he encountered any one, man or woman, who expressed such odious ideas. He replied, deeply shocked, "It has always been my impression, Madame le Marquise, that . . ."

"Exactly so, my dear Curé; we quite agree."

Then, in a more subdued voice, she added, "Claire . . . where is the grave?"

"Come with me, Jeanne. . . . I will lead you to it. Come . . . in silence. It is here."

Madame de Rochedure looked steadily at the tomb. At first she showed no emotion. She gazed respectfully but coldly. By degrees an expression of pain appeared on her face. Her hands came together—and pressed each other. Her lips contracted and began to quiver. It was evident she was becoming deeply moved, but that she was struggling

against her growing agitation. Suddenly she was beaten. She burst violently into tears, and exclaimed, with unrestrainable excitement, "Oh, Claire, it is more than I can bear! It unnerves me utterly! It teaches me that I, too, must find a grave . . . his . . . or mine! I cannot live on like this. I am too hopelessly miserable. It has done me no good to know you. All that I have learnt is, that your happiness is saved and that mine is gone for ever. But . . . what an idiot I am, to behave in this incoherent way! And before all these village people! I never had much self-control . . . and I have lost the little I had. I shall go back to Paris to-night."

"Meanwhile, Jeanne," said Claire, soothingly, "we will all go back to Honfleur. Conrad has seen enough for to-day, and he, too, is weary."

CHAPTER XXX.

Soon after they reached the hotel, Claire went to Madame de Rochedure and found her reading the 'Figaro,' while her maid was packing.

"What! You are really going?" exclaimed Claire.

"Certainly, my friend. Why should I stop here? We can do nothing for each other. I have heard all about it. I am only in your way. I am examining the suicides in the paper, and am wondering whether I am brave enough to solve my difficulties in that fashion."

"Do you believe it would be a solution?"

"Well, frankly, no. Solution means, I take it, the removal of doubt, and death is, precisely, the greatest doubt I know of. No, I am not going to kill myself. I talk about it, because

it is my nature to talk nonsense, just as it is yours to talk sense. But I see four objections to it. The first, that I am afraid of pain; the second, that it is a jump in the dark; the third, that, if I died, I should have to leave off talking—at least I suppose so; the fourth, that death is ugly. I have never been pretty; but I should be uglier dead than alive. No, Claire, I will not do it."

"Then, if you abandon that wise scheme, what are your next intentions?"

"I go to Trouville this evening, to see who is there. If I encounter acceptable companions, I shall divert myself there. If not, I shall divert myself elsewhere."

"And you will come to Hurley some time next month, for our marriage?"

"Shall I? I am not sure. What I have felt to-day has frightened me. It is a fact, Claire, that I have been envious of your happiness. However unworthy I may be, I am not going to sink to the utter vileness of jealousy of my dearest friend. If sufficient peace exists in my heart to permit me to feel sure of myself, I will be there to fasten on your orange-flowers for you. But if, when the

time arrives, I am still in my present condition, I shall stay away."

"If you are absent, the day will be incomplete for me. You were the witness of our growing love. You came to nurse me when I was dying. It was you who sent me to the Calvados shore. You must stand at my side that day. You *must* be there, Jeanne."

"We will see. I promise nothing. Write to me to Paris. My letters will be sent to me, wherever I may be."

In the evening, after the departure of Madame de Rochedure, as they sat together, Madame d'Héristal asked, "What are the plans arranged?"

"They are to be married next month at Hurley," answered Harriet Brandon—"or, more exactly, at the Catholic Church at Lorston; they go to Austria for the winter; and Conrad adds the name of Brandon to his own."

"Well, my dear friends," declared M. de Morvan, gravely, "you enter marriage under conditions which ought to lead you to exceptional success. I told you once, Claire, in Paris, when we were discussing the value of the various manners of arranging marriage,

that the method of falling in love would be the best that you could follow, and . . ."

"And I asserted, on the contrary," broke in Madame d'Héristal, "that nothing could be more dangerous for Claire than to fall in love. It seems to me that I was right, Charles, not you."

"You were right yesterday, Juliette. But I am right to-day. If love succeeds, it succeeds like nothing else."

"It is far too risky to be tried by wise people," laughed the Marquise. "Poor Claire has found that out."

"Yes; but it *has* succeeded, at last," urged Claire. "It is only the end that counts."

"Now that they have got to the end," went on M. de Morvan, "I cannot conceive a past more full of promise for the future, a sorrow more fruitful of joy. In the pictures of your life that you two sketched out together, I suppose, at Ems, I am certain you forgot to put in shade. You did not remember that light exists only by its contrast with shade. Like other beginners, you used, I doubt not, bright colours alone in your painting of the future. That was your mistake. Then the

great instructor came. With a harsh hand he corrected the errors of your composition. You can go on now to finish your joint work, in the trust that, if you profit by the teaching you have received, you ought to be able to produce a masterpiece of happiness."

"You are right to say 'produce,' Charles," asserted Madame d'Héristal. "The foremost lesson I have learnt from life is that happiness requires to be 'produced.' It does not grow by itself, like a weed on the roadside. It needs culture—unceasing, special, most careful culture. Most people make the insane mistake of leaving their happiness (if they have any) to look after itself, untended, as if it were a hardy plant, capable of living on vigorously, without heed or husbandry. You have learnt, poor Claire, that it is the most delicate, the most fragile, the most perishable of growths; that it is at the mercy of the first cold wind that blows; that it can only be preserved in health by watchfulness of each instant, by shielding it jealously from the approach of every possible foe, by making its maintenance the object of all our preoccupations, of all our inventiveness, of all our concentrated thought."

"And even then," remarked Conrad, "there are cases, everywhere, in which all care is useless, in which happiness is killed and cannot be revived. Our own happiness was in that state yesterday. It has been brought to life again by accident, not by effort. The happiness of Madame de Rochedure is in that state to-day. No will could bring back contentment to her."

"I told her so this morning," said Claire, sadly. "I confessed to her that I, who once regarded will as the most reliable of human strengths, have found that there are trials under which it utterly breaks down."

"That is because you asked too much from it, Claire," replied Madame d'Héristal. "Your will gave way under a pressure which would have destroyed any force whatever. Remember that even prayer abandoned you. I do think that, formerly, you attributed too great a power to will, and that you did not take into account the possibility of situations in which, as you have seen, every faculty within us is crushed out. But in all ordinary cases, will—such rock-like will as yours, I mean—deserves some confidence; and I appeal to you not to

cast it aside as a broken tool because it has been unable to perform work which was beyond the reach of any human power whatever."

"I fear I shall be unable to preserve my trust in it, even at your request, my dear kind friend. I counted it as a principle. My nature needs to rely on principles."

"Principles? . . . nonsense!" cried the Marquise. "Principles are illusory shams. They are as shifting as the wind; as unsteady as ships at sea; as unreliable as false witness. In spite of the immortal name we give to them, they are not, in reality, more durable than all our other transitory surroundings. In the past they have changed, continuously, with time and place; and they will go on changing in the future. It may be painful to enthusiasts like you, Claire, to have to recognise that, throughout history, there has been no permanence in principles; but no regrets can change the fact. Eternal truth has yet to be discovered."

"I rebel against the evidence," exclaimed Claire; "and I protest against the deductions you draw from it. However clear the proofs may be in your eyes, I thrust them indignantly

aside. To me principles are as immutable as they are essential. I own that will has failed me. I see now that it was not a principle, as I thought it was. I shall respect it no more."

"Dear Claire, that is exaggeration," urged M. de Morvan.

"What is exaggeration in one character may not be so in another. In me, if confidence is not absolute, it disappears altogether. I cannot have it partially. I shall never rely upon my will again. Do not defend it. It has been an unworthy servitor to me."

"Well, my child," laughed Madame d'Hérістal, "if you are unable to go on trusting it yourself, I can understand your telling Madame de Rochedure not to count upon it—especially as she has no will at all. But what is the poor woman to put in its place?"

"Nothing, I am afraid," answered Claire. "The poor woman, as you call her, was not born with the faculty of resistance, and she has not taken the pains to acquire it. She is disarmed in the fight. There is nothing for her but submission; but there, again, it would be a mockery for me to preach to her, for, in my own suffering, I could not bring myself to

submit. What immense vanity was in me! I wonder how much of it is left still, hidden away?"

The conversation was interrupted by Mr Gray, who asked permission to report that he had collected all the documents in proper form; that he was going to Paris to complete the legalisations, and would then proceed to London to take the necessary steps for obtaining a reversal of the judgment.

Next morning it was decided that they should separate. As far as Paris they would journey together. Conrad would then go on to Vienna to effect his own preparations, and Harriet Brandon and Claire would return to Hurley, where he would rejoin them as quickly as possible.

Early in the afternoon they went up once more to Iries to say good-bye.

Claire had, too, a special communication to make to the Curé.

She asked him to come to England to give her the Nuptial Benediction.

At this extravagant proposal the old man started. In all his experience no idea so utterly fantastic had stood up before him.

Since he was ordained he had never been out of the department. To go to another country; to cross the sea; to travel amongst people who spoke English; to leave his duties and his church; to do all this in order to marry a girl whom he had only known for a few days, appeared to his simple mind to be beyond the limits of both reason and possibility.

In his bewilderment he could not find a word to answer, but his manner and his face made Claire comprehend that, in his opinion, such a mad thing could not be.

She looked at him earnestly, and said, "Monsieur le Curé, you married my father and mother. You buried my mother. You baptised me. It is in your churchyard that I have found my mother's grave. To you I owe the marvellous change that has come over my life. I think you will acknowledge that those are good reasons for my desiring that you should be the priest who joins me to my husband."

"I do not deny it . . . oh, I do not deny it," stammered the old Curé. "I quite see . . . indeed, I quite see . . . that . . . that you would choose me. But . . . how could I

get away? . . . I should have to obtain permission from my bishop. I should be quite afraid to ask him. And he would have to send some one here while I was absent. And . . . you know . . . I could not officiate in England without authority from the bishop of your diocese. You see the difficulties are insurmountable."

Claire smiled. Such obstacles did not seem to her very grave.

"Monsieur le Curé," she went on, "I daresay your bishop will grant you leave of absence for a few days. The circumstances are so peculiar that I cannot believe he will refuse me the satisfaction I desire. I will make the necessary arrangements in England. I will send a person who can speak French and English to escort you from Iries to Hurley. You shall be brought home again in the same manner. Everything shall be done to render the journey easy and agreeable for you. In the name of my mother, do not say no."

The Curé had to yield. But he was deeply alarmed at the prospect, and felt very doubtful whether he would return alive.

Then came the farewells. Of course they were to come back. But for a time they would see Iries no more.

Claire was deeply affected. She had to tear herself away.

A few hours later they were in Paris.

The parting there with Conrad was not sad. It was but for a few weeks. They encouraged each other to be patient. Sorrow was behind them; in front, all was joy.

On reaching Hurley the Brandons found an arch of triumph and a band at the park gate, and all the neighbours assembled to receive them. The children sang a song of greeting. Claire was much touched by the sympathy shown to her.

When she entered the house, she stopped and whispered to her aunt, "Now . . . now . . . we have come *home*. Now . . . I am a Brandon of Hurley. Now . . . I shall bear a doubly honoured name."

A week passed by in active occupation.

Claire visited every cottage. She sought eagerly for new methods of shedding some of her own joy on to the people round her.

One of her particular delights was to sit

alone, in the wood-path, on the bench beneath the two old oak-trees, to recall the suffering she had endured there, to compare the present and the past, and to read Conrad's letters there.

Those letters were full of impatient tenderness. They made Claire feel that Conrad's love for her was as great as her own for him. In one of them he related that he had come to Steyer in order to pay a visit to Count Max, the "head of the house," whose castle was on the slopes of the Styrian Alps. He had thought it right, under all the circumstances, to go through the ceremony of informing personally Count Max of his approaching marriage. He was able to announce, with satisfaction, that Count Max cordially approved it, and would warmly welcome Claire. He did not think necessary to add that Count Max had been considerably influenced by the news that Claire was very rich, and that the somewhat declining incomes of the Hohenwalden race would be supplemented from an English source. He was also graciously pleased to authorise Conrad to add the name and arms of Brandon to his own, and to take the style of Count von Hohenwalden-Brandon.

One morning, when Harriet Brandon poured out the contents of the post-bag, an envelope with a wide black edge struck her eye. She took it at once out of the heap and looked at it.

"Who is this from, Claire?" she asked.

"Why . . . surely . . . it is Jeanne de Rochedure's writing. What can have happened?"

She opened it hastily and read—

"My husband is dead!

"He was training a horse for a steeplechase. It came down with him at a wall.

"I do not pretend to regret him; but I have nothing more to say against him.

"I will respect his memory more than I respected himself.

"The manner of my liberation is too horrible to permit me to feel real relief. But I do not deny that in my heart I have a sentiment of deliverance.

"I need not say that I cannot come to you. I will see no one now. I will pass the time of mourning in solitude and thought.

"I may issue from it a changed woman.

"When it is permitted to me to think of satisfying myself, my first desire will be to join you.

"I love you. I long to resemble you.

"You can aid me in the future with more hope of success than in the past.

"I throw my arms round your neck, sweet Claire.

"I no longer envy you. Some peace, some goodness may yet be given to me.

"Pray for me.

"Each of us has been saved by a grave.—Your faithfully fond JEANNE."

"Jeanne is free!" exclaimed Claire. "Her aspirations after happiness may yet be realised. This release from her bondage may make of her, as she says, a changed woman. Her letter indicates an excellent state of feeling. It is indeed delightful to be able to hope for her. There were moments when positively I felt ashamed of being so gloriously joyous while she was suffering. I will write to her at once."

When the time drew near, the Valonas, Madame d'Héristal, and M. de Morvan came.

The Curé of Iries arrived next, half frightened, shy, bewildered, staring timidly and incredulously at everything around him.

At last Conrad reached Hurley, accompanied by two witnesses, his cousins, Prince Karl Teplitz, and Count Egon Hohenwalden, Count Max's second son.

It was with strange joy that Claire held out her hands to Conrad at the door. Her heart was very full; but all she said was, "Welcome to our home."

The walk round in the afternoon was a triumphal march. All the people greeted Conrad, and Conrad was delighted with everything he saw.

The day before the marriage Claire took him to the seat beneath the oak-trees.

"I have reserved this," she said, "for the end. It was here that I came to weep. To-day I bring you here to rejoice with me, and to listen to the last words I have to say to you before I become your wife. I have been making an examination of my conscience, and I wish that you should know the thoughts which have passed through me. I was a wayward child, Conrad, full of dis-

orderly capacities and of fantastic ambitions. My first waking to reality was in Paris, when we left Venice. It was there that doubts entered into me, and that I began to recognise how much I needed training. I thought, in my inexperience, that disciplined will and hard work would repair the early faults of my nature, and I relied upon them so completely, I saw in them such force and value, that they appeared to me to be almost living agents. I laboured; I collected knowledge; I acquired self-control, and even some little portion of the 'modesty' which Madame d'Héristal had informed me I so sorely needed. The progress I effected was very real. I see that now even more clearly than then. But the progress was based on a false estimate of my own character. As my will had seemed to serve me faithfully in the effort, I respected it more and more, and counted on it more and more as the solid foundation of my actions. It was not till I met you, Conrad, that I began to recognise—faintly and inattentively at first—that will was not, after all, the highest of abilities. I perceived that love rose over it, far over it and beyond it. But still I trusted will. Then

came our pain—our awful pain. What love had commenced, pain finished. Will disappeared before it. I was destroyed. My struggle to acquire a solid leverage in life had served for nothing. It is true that I resisted, that I refused to be your wife, that I defied the weakness of my nature; but it was not will, Conrad, that held me up in the steadfastness of my refusal to yield. It was duty, duty alone, the duty of self-respect. You will say, perhaps, that duty cannot exist without will; and so long as will is subservient to duty, its mere agent and tool, I acknowledge that it does aid duty. But I, remember, had regarded will as the guide of duty, not duty as the guide of will. I had placed it first and foremost amongst human faculties. That, Conrad, was my egregious error. I called to will to save me in the storm, and it held to me no succouring hand. And now to-day, in all the radiant glory of to-day, I ask myself, with the new light which illuminates my soul, whether, after all, will—even if it had succeeded—was a woman's attribute? To be a truly womanly woman,—to possess none—absolutely none—but purely feminine endow-

ments, — has been, I think, the intensest — because it was the most comprehensive — of my many ambitions, and the coming into me of love has added, if possible, to its vigour. For that reason, all the more, I am beginning to suspect that will is masculine ; that it is not only untrustworthy, but unfeminine as well. So, Conrad, the outcome of my thinking is that I abdicate my will, that I take your will for my leader instead of my own, and that, for a true woman, there is but one perfect purpose in existence — to prepare herself to love ! "

Conrad asked, excitedly, " And what is the preparation, Claire ? "

" To hold the heart in readiness," she cried ; " to be humble in approaching love ; to be passionately grateful when it is reached. I did not know that, Conrad. But I have passed since through teachings which have given me, before marriage, an unusual insight into the nature of love. At Ems I loved you with an eager tenderness, a joyful agitation, a timid trustfulness, which seemed to me, in my inexperience, to represent the highest conceivable form of affection. Then came the

tempest. Amidst its raging clouds I got another view, lurid, alarming. I saw, with terror, that love can become cruel suffering, and yet, amidst the terror, grow more resistless than before. I loved you in my grief, with an awful all-devouring earnestness that I had not known in joy. A third phase appeared to me at Langrune. There, upon the sand, I knew that love can crush, can devastate, can destroy. I thrust the consuming feeling from me, but its rapid passage through my heart revealed to me the possibility of its existence. And now the sun has risen after the night; now calm has ensued from the whirlwind; now delight has followed upon sorrow. Now I understand at last the highest shape of love—the love that grows from trial. In humility, in gratitude, and in passion, my life will pass at your side. Conrad, I am prepared."

Conrad had listened breathless, intent, absorbed. He had not dared to speak while Claire poured out her memories. Seeing that she had finished, he replied, "I take your love, my Claire, in every form your heart may give to it. Each thought that comes from

you is love. If duty, will, work, sorrow, joy, have led you on to love me as you love to-day, permit me to be, in the words you use yourself, humbly, passionately grateful to them all, without distinction. Cause or result, effect or consequence, means or end—they all have led us to the crowning triumph of to-day, to the vastness of the joy we feel. You are indeed a woman, Claire. If my mother hears us, she must rejoice, at last, that you become my wife."

The next day they were married.

The revival of "the Brandon case," by the commencement of proceedings for setting aside the verdict, had attracted public attention. Most of the papers had repeated the half-forgotten story, and had described the finding of the proofs. The marriage of Claire, under such conditions, had aroused a widespread feeling of interest; and a large crowd, including nearly all the residents for many miles round Lorston, and even strangers from a distance, had assembled inside and outside the small church, to testify sympathy almost as much as to satisfy curiosity. The gathering was so dense that the bridal party had some difficulty in making its way through it.

M. de Morvan led Claire to the altar. It seemed to him that, in doing so, he gave a special consecration to his affection for her.

When the Curé of Iries had performed the marriage, he said the Nuptial Mass.

Timidly, awkwardly, but with the dignity of priesthood and of age, the good old man pronounced, in a voice that vibrated with emotion, the discourse that is always addressed, abroad, to newly married persons. As it was in French, it was understood by few of the congregation; but that did not matter to the Curé—it was for God and Claire and Conrad only that he spoke.

"My children," he said, "it has pleased Almighty God, in His infinite goodness, to permit you to enter into the holy state of marriage. He has led you, through grievous sadness, to this altar. In His sacred name I have bestowed upon you the Nuptial Benediction.

"Let your hearts overflow with thanksgiving. Never was thanksgiving more due.

"Claire Brandon, there is between you and me a spiritual bond which justifies my presence here to-day. Not only do I act here as the priest of God, but also I represent the dead.

Claire Brandon, you received from me, in unknowing babyhood, the Sacrament of Baptism. At the same time, I laid in her grave your mother, whom I alone, of all here present, have known and honoured. From my hands, again, you have just received, in hoping womanhood, the Sacrament of Matrimony. Furthermore, it has pleased Divine Providence to use me for the discovery of the proofs you sought. I speak to you with the tender authority which that position authorises me to assume towards you, and I tell you that the admirable mercy of which you have been the object, imposes on you duties of a very special kind. You know what those duties are; your nature has already impelled you to discharge them; pay your great debt to God by continuing to succour others.

"Conrad von Hohenwalden, I deliver to your keeping a very noble woman. I believe you to be worthy of her. Give to her the joy she brings to you. Strengthen her in affliction; rejoice with her in prosperity; remember always that you owe her to the pity of our Divine Father. Thank Him with her.

"My children, at this supreme moment of

fervour and prayer, at this great instant of your lives, I venture to speak for those who are not here. Claire Brandon and Conrad von Hohenwalden, I humbly ask of God the permission to bestow upon you the blessing of Charles Brandon, and of Claire Halville, his wife, your father and mother.

"In the profoundest gratitude, I thank God that it has been given to you to reach peace, and that He has been pleased to select me to aid in doing towards you His will.

"Again, from the bottom of my heart, and with all my earnestness, I bless you."

Claire sobbed aloud.

Conrad tightened his hands and held his breath, to steady his agitation.

Harriet Brandon was suffocated with tears.

All those who comprehended were deeply moved.

When the Mass was finished, when the time came to quit the church, the crowd, in much excitement, formed a long lane down the aisle to the carriage.

On leaving the altar Claire and Conrad stopped. Conrad bowed low. Claire made a deep, slow, stately reverence.

Then from the organ burst the "Wedding March" of Mendelssohn, and Claire and Conrad turned and faced the sunlight that streamed in from the wide-opened doors.

Radiant in the silvery sheen of satin and the vaporous mist of lace, Claire threw back exultingly her head with its crown of orange-flowers.

Suddenly, in that moment of great rapture, there came to her another and almost a higher joy. It seemed to her, as she looked above the earth, amidst the music, that she was conscious of the loving presence of the dead.

Superbly she advanced, leaning on her husband's arm, to the sound of the triumphal measures. Never had her presence been so regal. A murmur of admiration rose around her. The people said, "She did deserve success."

When they got back to Hurley, Harriet Brandon took Claire to her room, and, with very deep emotion, said to her, "I tried to do my duty to you, and to be worthy of the trust your father placed in me. But I committed a great error. You have forgiven me, and it has pleased God to efface the consequences of that error. You have reached great happiness

What may remain to me of life will be very bright."

Claire held her in her arms, and answered, "Aunt, mother, you have indeed done your duty. It will be the joy of your grateful child to cherish and to gladden you."

Then Claire sent for Berthe and kissed her.

"My faithful friend," she said, "I thank you."

In the afternoon Claire and Conrad were left at Hurley. All the others went to London.

As soon as they were alone, they went to sit once more upon the bench beneath the oak-trees.

In silence they held each other's hands and gazed into each other's eyes.

After a while, Claire whispered, "My husband, we will lay my orange-flowers on my mother's grave. We owe them to it."

THE END.

PRINTED BY WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS.

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